



NARUTO SAKURA'S STORY

Masashi Kishimoto

Tomohito Ohsaki

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SAKURA HIDDEN

SHIREN HARUKAZE NI NOSETE



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NARUTO SAKURA-HIDEN SHIREN, HARUKAZE NI NOSETE

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NARUTO
SAKURA'S
STORY

Love Riding
the Spring Breeze

ORIGINAL STORY BY
Masashi Kishimoto

WRITTEN BY
Tomohito Ohsaki

TRANSLATED BY
Jocelyne Allen



Love Riding the Spring Breeze

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CHARACTERS

Ninja from Konohagakure

やまなか
いの

YAMANAKA INO

Ninja from Konohagakure

はる
の
春野
サクラ

HARUNO SAKURA

Ninja from Konohagakure

サイ

SAI

Anbu from
Konohagakure

マギレ

MAGIRE

Anbu from
Konohagakure

つみ
き
積木
キド

TSUMIKI KIDO

Ninja from Konohagakure

うちは
サスケ

UCHIHA SASUKE



Reminiscing

Reminiscing

I remember everything. All the things Sasuke said to me.

You're annoying.

That was a bit of a shock. But I was the one to blame then. Getting all carried away in front of him, going on about things that would have been better left unsaid. I really was annoying.

Mm-hmm, it just makes sense.

You really...are annoying.

This when Sasuke was leaving the village. It was a shock to me then, too. But then he followed it with this: *Sakura...*

Thank you.

And that really saved me. Just that “thank you.” He left the village after that, and then it was day after day after day of not seeing him. But that “thank you” gave me the strength to believe in Sasuke.

∞

There was a terrible fight—no, the word terrible doesn't begin to do it justice. There was a fight that nearly destroyed the world, and that's when Sasuke came back to us.

And once the battle was over, he left on a journey. I told him I wanted to go with him, and he said, *You have nothing to do with my sins.* But then he continued: *I'll see you soon.*

Thank you...

And he poked my forehead.

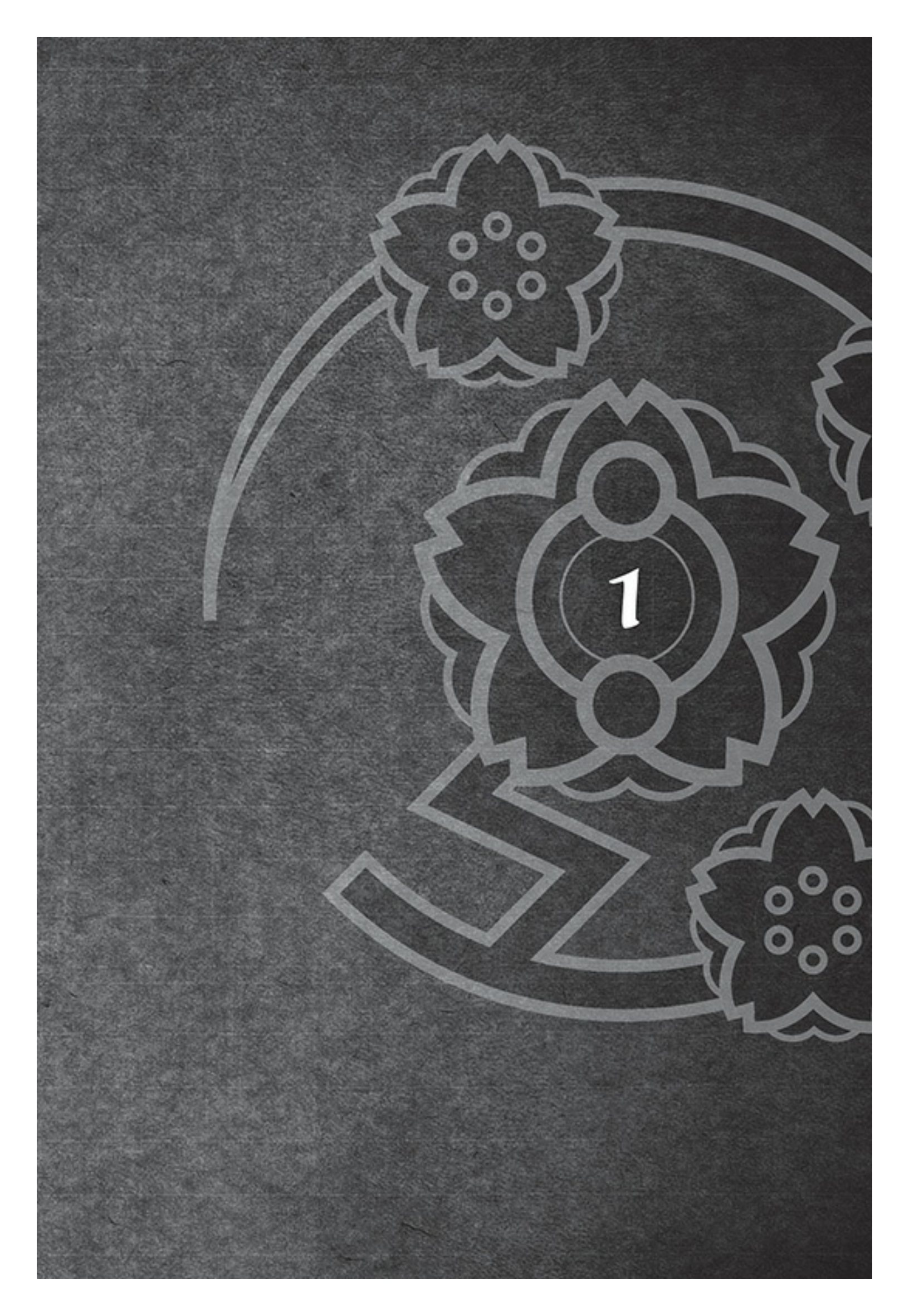
“I'll see you soon.” “Thank you.” I repeated those words over and over again in my heart. Along with the remembered sensation of that poke.

We started at “You're annoying,” and we've made it all the way to “I'll see you soon.” My heart feels a little warmer somehow when I think about it like that.

Sasuke. Where are you now?

Sasuke.

Me? Right now, I'm...



1

Chapter 1

1

A female medical ninja, perhaps two years younger than Sakura, explained the papers Sakura held in her hands. "As I'm sure you can see looking at the data in the documents I've handed out, the number of children complaining of mind-body issues has been reliably decreasing."

"So that means that in the year and a half since we introduced the program, there's been a nice improvement, hmm?" Sakura said.

"Yes, plenty of improvement." The medical ninja nodded. Her cheeks were a little red, maybe because of nerves. "In cases where the patient's condition continues with no improvements through talk therapy, we are working in cooperation with other departments in the hospital and taking measures such as prescribing medicine."

"So then there's no problem," Ino noted, sitting beside Sakura.

"I suppose so." Sakura nodded her agreement before adding, "But let's move forward very carefully with coordination with other departments. Just because there's no improvement after talk therapy doesn't mean we should immediately move to treat the patient with medication. The first thing is to listen very carefully to what the children have to say. That's why the children's therapy center was established in the first place, after all."

The presentation of the documents before them continued, future policies and plans were confirmed, and then the meeting was over.

Sakura and Ino left the Konoha Hospital conference room together.

"She was a little nervous, hmm?" Ino said, as they walked down the hallway.

"The girl giving the briefing? Maybe she's not used to it yet. Standing in front of people and talking, I mean."

"I'm sure that was part of it, but I wonder if it wasn't also because her beloved hero Sakura was right there in front of her."

"What are you talking about?" Sakura asked, and Ino smiled playfully.

“You don’t know?” she said. “You’re super popular with the younger ranks. You’re a medical ninja, but a strong fighter. And on top of that, you’re great at your job *and* beautiful. All that, you’re bound to be popular.”

I want some of that too! Ino’s smile shouted.

“Quit it,” Sakura retorted, with a wry smile of her own.

They chatted in friend mode for a while before Ino brought the conversation back toward work. “But it feels like it’s finally on track, doesn’t it? The children’s therapy center.”

“It does, doesn’t it?”

It had been nearly two years since Sakura proposed to the upper ranks the creation of a department at Konoha Hospital specializing in the care of children’s hearts and minds. That had been about six months after the end of the Fourth Great Ninja War, which brought together the shinobi of the world to stop the resurrection of Otsutsuki Kaguya.

In the face of such a powerful enemy the shinobi had been pushed to the brink of despair any number of times, but the ninja alliance, centered on Naruto, had still fought—never once breaking or yielding—to shatter Kaguya’s ambitions.

When peace came, the people rejoiced. The world was saved. Reconstruction eventually began, with repairs starting in regions and on structures damaged in the massive conflict.

As a medical ninja, Sakura had been busy treating the many injured shinobi. There were few with grave injuries, and the people who came for treatment all looked peaceful and content, thanks to a sense of security that came from the war finally being over.

What about the children?

That thought suddenly crossed her mind when she happened to see Kurenai cradling her baby in the hospital. The children, who hadn’t taken part directly in the war, might have been uninjured physically. But what about their minds?

Wouldn’t the fighting and its unforeseeable end have placed a huge stress on

their young minds? They saw their country in ruins around them, they learned of the deaths of people close to them—wouldn't this have scarred their souls?

Sakura began collecting data on the people coming to the hospital and found that a large number of children who came in after the war complained of poor health, but nothing could be found physically wrong with them.

I can't just leave them like this.

Children were the village's treasures, as the third Hokage Hiruzen often used to say. Older ninja carved these words into their hearts as a kind of collective understanding.

Sakura first discussed the idea of setting up a specialized organization within the hospital and creating a structure to provide care for children's mental health with her mentor, Tsunade.

"I think it's a good idea," Tsunade had remarked. "Take the lead on this, Sakura, and move forward with it."

With her mentor at her back, Sakura started making the preparations: securing and training personnel for this new organization, cooperating with Konoha Hospital and laying the groundwork, and then developing a budget. There were far too many things for Sakura to do them all by herself, but her old classmate Yamanaka Ino brought help.

"You really have a surprisingly serious side. You try to carry it all on your own, and it's just sad when you pop."

With Ino's help and six months of preparation, Sakura managed to open the children's therapy center. They soon started to see steady and strong results. The presentation they had attended that day was the numerical representation of these results.

"It's all because of your help, Ino. Thanks."

"When you get your bonus, take me out for dinner," Ino said lightly. Sakura erupted into laughter.

"How about we get some tea?" Ino asked, once they were outside.

Sakura clapped her hands together apologetically in front of her face. "Sorry. I

have some papers I want to sort through today. Next time, all right?"

"Got it," Ino said, but there was a hint of worry on her face. Her eyes were asking if Sakura wasn't working too hard.

Sakura pretended she hadn't seen this and waved her hand. "See you." She started off down the market street by herself.

Although it was early in the afternoon, the town was bustling. The piled-up snow had completely melted away; all of a sudden, it was spring. The people hurrying to and fro were free of their heavy coats.

"Huh? Sakura?" Abruptly, she heard a voice from behind. A voice she knew well.

"Naruto! Hinata!" Turning around, she saw the two of them walking toward her, dressed in street clothes. "What's this? A date?"

"Yup. For once, we're both off duty," Naruto said.

"What about you, Sakura?" asked Hinata.

"A meeting with Ino at the hospital."

"I heard about that, y'know. Aah, that, whaddyacallit, children's... Um, something center?"

"The children's therapy center," she corrected him. "So where are you off to? Dinner?"

"Mm-hmm." Hinata nodded. "At Ichiraku."

"Hey." Naruto came over to whisper into Sakura's ear. "So, like, in the copy of *An-An* I borrowed from Sai, it said that the guy should pay for the date, but a full-course dinner's super expensive."

Sakura giggled at the slightly pale Naruto. "It's okay," she whispered back. "You don't have to try that hard."

"What are you talking about?" Hinata cocked her head to one side.

"Oh! No! It's nothing. Nothing at all!" Naruto grinned and rubbed his stomach with one hand. "Looking forward to ramen."

Perhaps because the gesture was ridiculous, Hinata burst out laughing. And as

the two of them smiled at each other, Sakura felt a broad grin spread across her own lips.

It had been a few months since Naruto and Hinata became an official couple. Sakura had fretted more than a little at the new relationship between late bloomer Hinata and purehearted Naruto, since she was so close to them, but now that they were so happily joined even that fretting was a fond memory.

It was that winter when it had all started. The final Otsutsuki descendant living on the moon, Otsutsuki Toneri, kidnapped Hinata's little sister Hanabi, took her byakugan, and plotted to destroy the world. Naruto was severely wounded in the fight with Toneri, and Hinata was also carried off, but once he recovered from his injuries Naruto crushed Toneri, and the world escaped destruction.

Through that mission, had Naruto realized he couldn't imagine life without Hinata and told her how he felt. And so, Naruto saved the world and came back with Hinata as his girlfriend. The news spread like wildfire through the village. Their former classmates and the older ninja teased them for a while, but that period was over now.

The other day, she had gotten an invitation. Their wedding was not far off.

"Right. Why don't you come for ramen with us, Sakura?" Naruto asked, grinning broadly.

"Look, you." Sakura sighed. "What would happen with me there? You're both off duty together finally. Go and date yourselves silly." She stepped behind them and gave their backs a little push.

She watched as they walked off down the market street. Naruto made some joke and Hinata laughed. They looked so happy.

Lucky, she thought unconsciously. But she couldn't *not* think it. The feelings she couldn't share built up in her heart and turned into sighs. At times like this, her brain invariably turned to work. The papers she had to go through, the reports she should take a look at.

Noticing that she had slipped into work mode without even realizing it, she grinned wryly.

This is why Ino's worried...

2

"Sakura, Suna's gotten back to us about that matter we were discussing earlier." The sixth Hokage Kakashi sat behind his desk, clad in the Hokage's hat and uniform. "They say they're ready whenever we are."

"Really?" Sakura's face shone.

Kakashi grinned. "How about you and Ino go? She's helped you out on this a fair bit, hasn't she?"

"All right, we'll do that!"

A week after she and Ino got the report on the results of the children's therapy center at Konoha Hospital, Sakura had been called to the Hokage's office. She had previously asked Kakashi if they could talk to Sunagakure, a member of the alliance, about how things were going with the children's therapy center.

After all, there had to be children mentally scarred by the stress of the war in places other than Konoha. In which case, creating something along the lines of the therapy center that was getting results in Konoha would benefit other villages as well.

"Anything that turns out to be useful, we really need to share with everyone. Go and teach them everything you know."

"I will, Master Kakashi. You've really helped so much with this. And with the budget too—you've accommodated us in so many ways."

"Of course! When a former student works this hard, I want to do whatever I can to help. And, well... I understand how much of a burden mental scars like that can be." Kakashi nodded lightly. "You decide on the schedule for the trip to Suna. Go and do what you have to."

"Yes, sir!" Sakura left the Hokage's office.

It would take four days to reach Sunagakure. She would have to sort through all those papers one more time while she thought about the ninja tools and equipment they'd need. She exited the Hokage's Residence and was thinking

about this and that as she walked along, when she spotted Sai a little way ahead of her, carrying a large scroll on his back.

“Sai!” she called out.

“Hey.” He stopped and came over to her.

“You needed to see Master Kakashi too?”

“Mmm, yeah,” was his noncommittal reply. “What about you, Sakura? What’d you need with the Hokage?”

Sakura told Sai about the trip to Sunagakure.

“Huh. Suna. You better be careful about getting enough water then. It’s pretty dry over there.”

Sakura nodded at Sai’s warning. “I’ll be okay. I’ll bring moisturizer. I mean, I have at least that much femininity to me.”

“You do, huh? You seem like you got more strength than femininity, though, so don’t go crushing that jar,” Sai said, grinning, and Sakura smiled along with him.

“Shall I use my strength to shut your mouth?” she asked.

“Ooh, scary!” he said, looking not the slightest bit scared, and started toward the Hokage’s Residence.

Honestly. Sakura grinned.

∞

“You called for me?” Sai said, standing in front of the Hokage’s desk.

“Sorry for the suddenness.” Kakashi closed the file he held.

“It’s fine. But a personal request for me... Is it a mission of some kind?”

“Mm. Well, it’s like a mission, but not anything official.”

Sai narrowed his eyes slightly. “What do you mean?”

“I want you to check into something for me. But I want you to move alone.”

“Check into what?”

Kakashi nodded and continued. “The daimyo came last week to recuperate at the village onsen and was attacked. You know about this?”

“Yes. I heard a single kunai shoot out and hit very close to where the daimyo was sitting in the water.”

“Well, there was basically zero damage. The daimyo was also uninjured. But the Anbu set up a strict watch around the onsen the daimyo went to that day. A single kunai—they should have easily taken care of that.” Kakashi paused. “A few days before that, when the advisor Master Homura came to inspect the village maneuvering ground, he and the two ninja with him were assaulted by thugs.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“Master Homura didn’t want it to turn into a big production, so we didn’t make it public.”

“That’s unsettling, men in the land’s senior ranks being attacked like that.”

“And in succession.”

“So you want me to look into these two incidents?”

“Right. Well, I don’t know if it stops at two, or if there’s a third, or if the same person’s responsible for both. Or maybe they’re totally separate,” Kakashi said. “At any rate, I want you to lump it all together into one investigation.”

“What about the Anbu?” Sai asked. “You’re not mobilizing them?”

“They’re moving, of course. But I want to set a thread of investigation going personally. And that’s you.”

“I understand. I’ll get moving right away.”

“Thanks.”

“You don’t want me to work with Naruto and Sakura? The investigation would be more efficient that way... Actually, Naruto’s not so great at this sort of thing.”

“So you understand.” Kakashi smiled. “He’s not really suited to this kind of covert mission. And Sakura has other work she needs to be doing right now.”

“That reminds me. I ran into her on my way over here. Said she’s going on a work trip to Suna.”

“That’s right, she is. Which is why, for the time being at least, you move alone, Sai. And I think you’ll be less conspicuous that way too.”

“Understood.”

“Be very careful.” Kakashi frowned. “I have the feeling this is no simple prank or petty criminal.”

“A master’s intuition?”

“Mmm. It’s right surprisingly often.”

“I’ll proceed with care. But you please take care as well.”

“Me?”

“The top-level people in the country are being attacked. It wouldn’t be at all strange if the Hokage were assaulted next.”

“I guess you’re right. I’ll be careful.” Even as he nodded, the thought flashed through Kakashi’s mind: *I wish they’d hurry up and target me already then.*

3

Sakura had met with Ino and gotten everything ready for their trip to Sunagakure the next day; they were all set. Just as she let out a contented sigh, Sakura was summoned by Tsunade to the bar where her mentor was a regular.

“I don’t actually have anything particular I wanted to talk to you about. I heard you were off on a trip tomorrow, and, well, I suppose this is a bit of a send-off.” Tsunade laughed. “The truth is, I just wanted to have a drink.”

Sakura knew her mentor was trying to cultivate a light tone to keep Sakura from feeling any obligation to report in. And Tsunade also thought Sakura was working too hard lately, so she had likely decided to drag her out to let off some steam.

It had been Tsunade, after all, who pushed Sakura to set up the children’s therapy center. Maybe she felt a bit responsible for how much Sakura was working now.

“But you’ve really turned out wonderfully, my little apprentice. I mean, setting up a therapy center for children. I can certainly hold my head high as your teacher.” As she drained one cup of sake after another, a hint of red rose up on Tsunade’s cheeks. She had hurried through dinner to start drinking at a brisk pace.

“But in the end, all I did was set up a contact point. The ones actually working with the children are specialists.”

“No need to be so humble. A lot of children have mental issues that they can’t really put into words. So it builds up and makes things hard for them in all kinds of ways. It’s very reassuring at a time like that to have someone reaching out a helping hand. And you created a structure for that. There’s plenty of meaning in that.”

“Yes ma’am.” Sakura felt rewarded and delighted by her teacher’s praise.

“By the way, how are things with Naruto and Hinata?” Tsunade asked, once the work talk had reached a natural conclusion.

“Good. I ran into them the other day, just as they were on their way out for a date. It looks like things are going really well.”

“And Hinata’s no doubt the type to hold the reins unexpectedly tightly when it comes to that sort of thing.”

“I think so. If he were in a relationship with someone more willful and determined, Naruto would probably be butting heads with her all the time. But I doubt anything like that will happen with Hinata.”

“It might have been difficult with a woman like you,” Tsunade said, flashing a grin.

“Ha ha!” Sakura laughed and scratched her head. That this smile soon turned into a sigh was almost certainly because her own romantic situation popped into her head once more.

I can’t. I can’t. Maybe a heart-to-heart conversation?

In a totally different tone, Sakura started speaking hurriedly, “Master, I’m just going to be totally honest and ask you. How do you get a guy to turn around

and look at you?”

“Hmm... if you want a man to look at you...” Tsunade paused for a moment. “Breasts, I guess.” She thrust her own chest out.

Breasts... The answer is breasts.

“Hmm. I knew it.” Sakura slumped down in her seat. “Hinata’s are pretty big, after all.”

“Don’t be silly. I was kidding,” Tsunade was quick to add. “What makes a person turn around depends on the person.”

“Oh. That’s what I want to think...”

“Keep fighting, Sakura. I suppose this is the one thing I can’t lend a hand with, hm?”

“In that case, please bet on me, Master,” Sakura said.

“Bet on you?”

“That my love life won’t go well. Your bets are often wrong, right? So.”

Tsunade puffed up proudly and smiled. “Got it. I’ll do that.”

4

The next day, Sakura and Ino slipped through the big village gates and set out for Sunagakure.

The Land of Wind’s Sunagakure was located to the west of the Land of Fire’s Konohagakure. After leaving Konoha, travelers had to pass through the plains and dense woodlands to reach Sunagakure on the other side.

If Sakura and Ino pushed themselves they could arrive in three days, but this was no emergency. They had no intention of moving at high speeds. They had told their contact in Sunagakure that they planned to arrive four days later.

The weather was calm, and the trip was an easy one. Dressed in their mission uniforms, the two women chatted as they ran through the plains at a comfortable pace.

“Something’s definitely going on between Temari and Shikamaru, right?” Ino said, when they had been running for about two hours.

Sakura looked over at her friend and saw a playful smile dancing on her lips. Her beautiful waist-length hair was tied back. "Going on?"

"Like maybe they're dating."

"Really?!"

"Yeah. I mean, they're definitely dating."

"So you're declaring it."

They were still running as they talked, but neither was the least out of breath.

"Seriously," Ino continued. "I mean, Temari sometimes comes to Konoha, right? For work."

"Well, she is in charge of diplomacy for Suna."

"So, like, I saw them the other day. Shikamaru and Temari walking together."

"Come on!" Sakura laughed. "That's nothing special. And they might have been talking about work."

Shikamaru also held an important position within the village and was in frequent contact with diplomats from other lands. Sakura herself had seen him walking around the village with Temari any number of times.

"Okay, I'll give you that. But it's just, they have this look like they're involved somehow. It's not like they're holding hands or anything. It's maybe the looks on their faces and just the general mood? When I saw them the other day, it was totally like that. Normally, I would've called out to them, but I dunno, I wasn't sure if I should. I didn't actually end up saying anything to them."

"Really? Temari and Shikamaru, huh?" But if she were being honest, Sakura wasn't particularly surprised by this combination.

Those two had some kind of connection. They had faced off as opponents during the chunin selection exams. And during the mission to recover Sasuke, Temari was the one who showed up to help Shikamaru as he fought Tayuya from Otogakure. Even after all that, they spent time together for various reasons, established as comrades from different villages. That their feelings might have shifted from simple friendship into something deeper through

missions and work and the Great War wasn't at all strange.

"Maybe I'll ask Temari about it when we get there," Ino said, giggling.

"You'd better not. She'll beat you with that giant fan."

"Aha ha! She would too!"

Their easy conversation brought joy to Sakura's heart. "It's spring for everyone, I guess. But even if Shikamaru's involved with Temari, Choji at least is still more interested in eating than love, right?" Sakura asked.

"No, no, he's totally not!" Ino said, before continuing with a look on her face that let Sakura know she was imparting confidential information. "Karui from Kumogakure."

"No way!" This was unexpected. "That—how can I put this—that *fierce* girl?"

"Yup. Lately, right? Choji's been making up all kinds of excuses to go to Kumogakure. Which I thought was *pretty* suspicious. So I grilled him on it. And then he was all mumbling and stammering this stuff about how he had dinner plans with Karui. It was really just a matter of time." Ino nodded her agreement with herself.

"I guess so." Sakura nodded too. A thought suddenly struck her. "Anyway, what about you, Ino? What's going on in your love life lately?"

When they were little, Sakura and Ino had been out-and-out rivals in love, with both of them setting their sights on Sasuke, but as they grew older, it felt like Ino had dropped out of that race. Sakura wanted to know who Ino was crushing on now, or if she was even interested in anyone.

"Yeeah... Well, there's someone," Ino replied, embarrassed.

"What? You have a boyfriend?"

"No. Not a boyfriend. But I have someone I think it'd be nice to be with."

"Wow!" Unconsciously, Sakura drew closer to Ino. "I had no idea. So what? Who? Tell me!"

"You're really getting your teeth into this one, Sakura."

"But I'm curious now. Give me a hint. Just a hint."

“A hint?” Ino thought for a moment, and then said, with red cheeks, “Someone good at painting.”

“Come on, that’s not a hint, it’s an answer!” Sakura retorted. “Huh, so that’s it. Sai, huh?”

“But isn’t it kind of unexpected?”

“I guess.”

Ino had shown an interest in Sai right from the start, when he took Sasuke’s place on Team Seven. She said he was cool and kind of looked like Sasuke.

“At first, it was like, well, yeah, I guess he’s sort of hot, but then I don’t know, these feelings. Now I’m completely swept away—wait, what?! I am totally saying the most embarrassing stuff. Aah! Eeep!”

“Calm down, relax.” Sakura soothed Ino. “So, then...have you told him?”

“That, um, not yet...” Ino’s voice grew quieter, a reaction Sakura hadn’t expected. She had an image of Ino being relatively smooth with the opposite sex and acting decisively on her thoughts, but things were apparently different this time.

“I can’t decide...lavender or dogwood,” Ino said.

“Lavender or dogwood?”

“Yeah. In the language of flowers, lavender means ‘I’m waiting for you,’ and dogwood is ‘Accept my feelings.’ I could create a kind of mood to make Sai receptive and wait for him, or I could just go and blurt out that I like him. I’m trying to decide which is better.”

“Right.” How like the daughter of a florist to explain in the language of flowers. “I think...you’re more the dogwood type,” Sakura remarked.

Ino nodded. “Right? Like, in terms of my personality. Aah, I can’t decide.” She placed a hand on her furrowed brow, which Sakura somehow found adorable.

If it were me, Sakura suddenly thought. Lavender maybe? That sounds right...

Even if she did try to tell him to accept her feelings, Sasuke was out there somewhere far away, traveling. All she could do was wait.

But, she thought. How long do I have to wait...?

5

A man wearing a traveler's coat bearing a single sword stood face-to-face with a man in a black vest with a sharp glint in his eye. Behind the man in the vest were dozens of his companions, but the man in the coat was alone.

Several tents had been pitched nearby. A hideout, surrounded by rocky mountains and sand. The tents were the color of sand and would have been hard to spot from above.

"Are you serious when you say that? That you'll join up with us and commit acts of terrorism in Konohagakure?" the man in the vest asked.

The man in the coat nodded. "I am. Don't make me say it a million times."

"This is different from the story I heard. Didn't you give up your hatred of the village and actually fight for it?"

"People change," the man in the coat said, in an icy voice. "My hatred didn't disappear. I thought it had for a minute there, but I was wrong. I intend to move again to crush that place."

The man in the vest stared at him.

Today was the second time they had met. The first time they had quickly chased him off. The story he had told them was simply too fishy. But the man didn't learn; he had come to see them again.

"Why d'you want to join up with us? Let's hear your reasons," the man in the vest demanded.

"I've heard the rumors about you," said the man in the coat, without any expression on his face. "That you're former Sunagakure ninja, that you're a group of masters. That you, the leader, in particular, are fairly good with Wind Style. I'm counting on that power."

"That doesn't exactly answer the question. Do you know what kind of organization we are?"

"I do. You're a terrorist group of rogue ninja from Suna who are dissatisfied with Suna's current structure." There was an echo of disdain in the way the man

spoke, and the man in the vest was displeased.

“That’s right. We do want to reform the current structure of Suna. And it’s a fact that we’re looking for strong ninja to that end. But we don’t have any grudge against Konoha. Why should we join with you and attack them?”

“My power should be an advantage to your organization. With it, you’ll have no trouble staging a coup d’état in Suna. And I’m saying that in exchange, you need to help me bring Konoha down. Once Konoha is destroyed, I’ll lend my support to your terrorism in Suna.”

The man in the vest snorted and shook his head. “We need to help you. You’ll lend us your support. I think you might have the wrong idea here. Where do you get off talking down to us?”

“Because I’m obviously above you. Listen. You’re the ones who have the wrong idea here. I’m not making you my comrades—you’re my subordinates. That way’s better for you too, so that’s the way it should be.”

The man in the vest closed his eyes—a deliberate blink to quiet his anger. He opened them again, and said, “We have a breakdown in communication here. There’s no talking to you. Just get out of here already.”

“I see. Then I will indeed disappear. But...” He narrowed his eyes. “Now you know about my plan to destroy Konoha.”

The man in the vest immediately wove signs with both hands.

Wind Style! Wind Slash!

The slicing wind trampled down his opponent and severed all four limbs from his body.

“Good reaction.”

As the voice reached his ears, the man in the vest realized his own body had been pierced from behind by a sword. It had appeared as though he had struck the final blow with his Wind Style, but that had merely been a genjutsu show.

“Ngh!” Blood and an anguished voice spilled from his mouth. Ninja rushed in from all directions.

“No one move!”

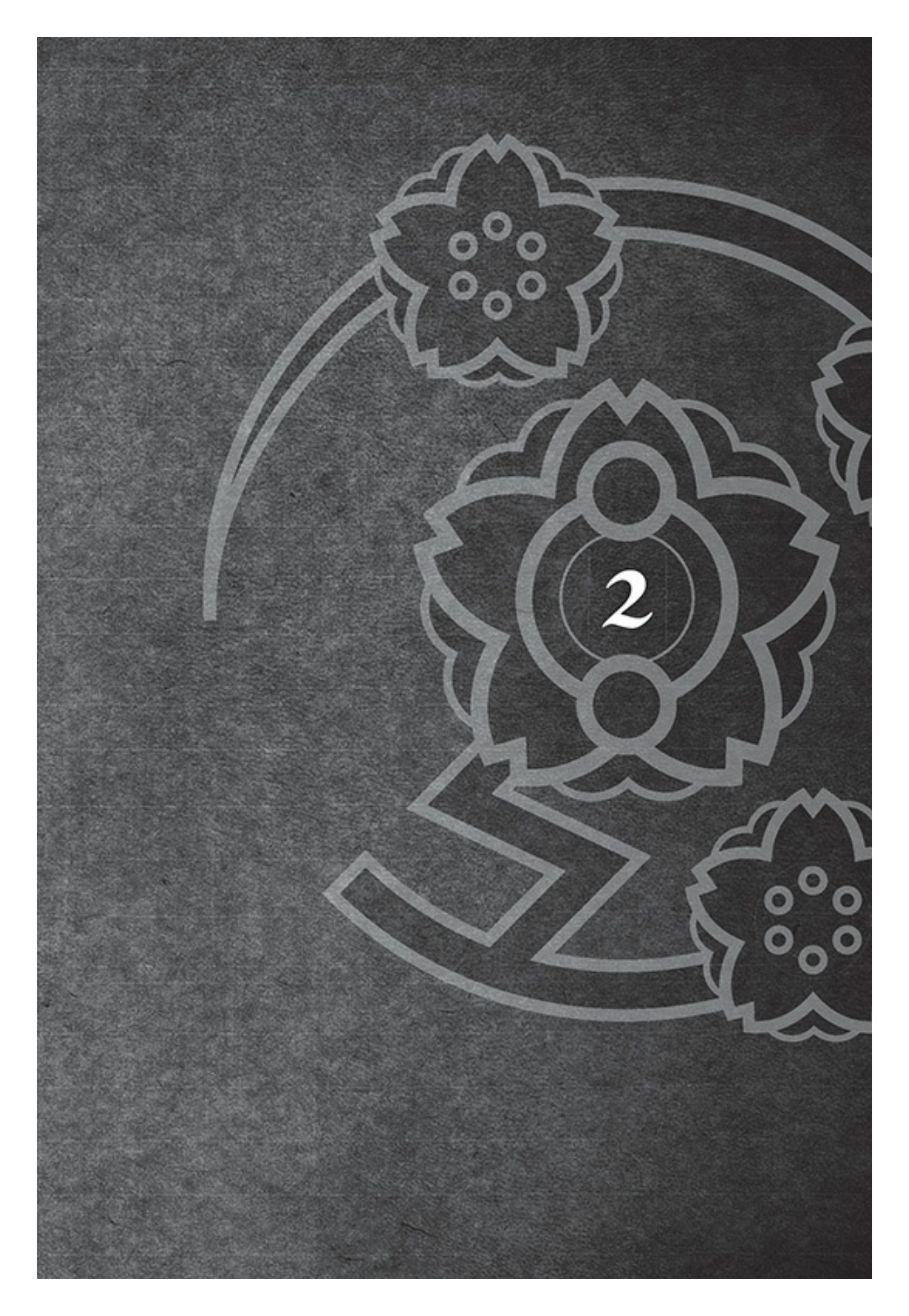
The ninja charging in wore the masks of the Sunagakure Anbu.

The feeling of something foreign stuck in his stomach disappeared, and the man in the vest toppled over. His field of view now horizontal, he watched the man in the coat leap a great distance away from them.

“He’s getting away!” someone in the Anbu shouted.

The crashing sound of angry roars and ninja tools—the Anbu were fighting.

In the midst of the sandstorm, the vision of the man in the vest grew dark.



2

Chapter 2

1

“So I just have to check these guys out?” the informer asked, holding the note Sai had given him. His shaved head and eyebrows made it hard to tell exactly how old he was. In fact, Sai had no idea how old the other man was.

They were in the woods just outside of the village. The sunlight filtering through the trees dappled the ground around them.

“Exactly.” Sai nodded.

“The Kiri rogue ninja Tenzen, Genba the Soul Remover, Baraki, leader of the criminal association known as The Deceased—these are all pretty big game. They’re basically impossible to find,” the informer noted. His voice didn’t carry far, perhaps covered up by the sound of water flowing in the nearby stream.

“Well, they’re who I want you to find. See if they’re up to anything. I want any scrap of information you dig up, no matter how trivial.”

“Understood.”

“You memorized their names?”

The informer nodded. Sai wove a simple sign with one hand, and the characters on the note the informer held disappeared, evaporating into thin air. They had been written in Sai’s own special ink.

“But still, why these guys?”

“You don’t need to know that.”

“Has this got anything to do with the advisor Master Homura being attacked?”

Sai stared at the informer’s face and smiled thinly. “Huh, so you know about that.”

“It’s my bread and butter. So you suspect one of these guys for it?”

“I’m pretty sure I said you don’t need to know.” Sai sharpened his gaze for a moment.

“Whoops, excuse me.” The informer looked startled. “I’ll keep that in mind. Anyway, these people being who they are, it might take a while to hunt them down,” he noted before leaving.

Sai also left the forest and set out along the road back to the village.

He had set his pet informer to work on the case, but he had a feeling the man would come back empty-handed. The informer might bring him some dirt on the three big-shot criminals, but whatever information he brought, it wasn’t very likely that it would be connected with the recent attacks. But he set the man in motion just in case.

A recuperating daimyo and an observing advisor had been assaulted. Kakashi said that he didn’t think it was simple thuggery, and Sai was inclined to agree.

The day Kakashi gave the order for this secret investigation, Sai had headed for the Anbu reference room and checked into both incidents.

The daimyo was under the powerful protection of the Anbu, both while he was traveling in the palanquin and after he arrived at the onsen. A kunai had shot in through some tiny opening in that guard and nearly hit the daimyo in the onsen. He couldn’t ignore the significance of this lone kunai. If it had been attached to an explosive tag, the damage could have been enormous.

When he was assaulted, the advisor Homura also had two shinobi standing watch—although they were not Anbu—as he made his observations. His attackers were three masked men. One of them sliced the advisor with a ninja sword, giving him a shallow wound on his arm. The trio had quickly fled, and the guards had given chase but failed to catch them or learn who they were. The guards said the fleeing villains had been cloaked in light purple chakra.

Given that they evaded the security that went in pursuit of them, and managed to injure an old veteran like Homura—however slightly—these men were strong ninja. The aim and scope of the enemy was unclear, but Sai was glad to see that in terms of ninja skill at least he was up against a worthwhile enemy.

And if powerful ninja were dirtying their hands with criminal activity, then his eyes naturally turned to the most wanted, most malicious criminals of the Bingo Book. Which was why Sai decided to get in touch with the informer and have

him hunt down the top-level people in it. Naturally, he couldn't have the informer track down every single one of those criminals, so he excluded the ones he could be sure had nothing to do with the attacks.

But the Anbu were probably already investigating at this level at least. Given that Kakashi had given him a secret order to start a separate investigation, Sai was sure that Kakashi had a hunch that someone much more mysterious was behind the incidents.

Sai considered his next move.

He could go to the onsen and the maneuvering ground where the attacks had taken place, or he could go through the Bingo Book again. Suddenly, he felt a presence behind him and stopped in his tracks.

He was a distance from the forest, already in a block of town, but it wasn't a busy part of the village. The concrete wall behind the factory ran alongside the road. There was no one else on the road. The enemy may have concealed their auras and waited until he had come this far before revealing themselves.

The fight came quickly enough.

A shuriken flew at him from behind. He knocked it to one side and whirled around to see how many people he was up against.

Two people, twenty meters or so away, in black masks. Probably the masked thugs—the ones who had attacked the advisor. He didn't know if there were others still concealing themselves.

Then came the follow-up attack.

One threw a kunai. The other one moved at the same time, a kunai held in an underhand grip. Clearly, he planned to attack Sai when his guard was down after dodging the flying kunai. Their coordination was impeccable.

Sai dodged the kunai and leapt backward to avoid the attack of the other man pressing in on him. As he flew, he pulled out his scroll and brush.

Art of Cartoon Beast Mimicry!

The two tigers outlined in his black ink drew life and charged toward his enemies.

That's probably the end of that, he thought, but his hope was betrayed.

A kunai pierced the forehead of one ferocious attacking tiger, turning it into a spray of black ink, while the target of the other tiger deftly evaded the beast's jaws, leapt onto its back, plunged a kunai into its throat and returned it to ink.

Sai gasped. They were stronger than he thought.

Having defeated his tigers, the enemies came at him again without dropping into any kind of defensive posture. One of them launched kunai and shuriken, and when Sai dodged these, the other jumped at him.

It was a simple combination play, but because the attack was so on point, Sai couldn't even find the thread of a counterattack.

He threw a smoke bomb at the ground. Smoke billowed out accompanied by an explosive pop. He hurriedly stepped out of the smoke and started drawing a new picture on his scroll.

As the smoke gradually cleared away, the enemy readied their kunai and braced themselves for his attack.

The first tigers Sai had drawn rushed toward the enemy. These tigers were smaller than the other two. But he had increased their number to six.

Some ran with heads low, some leapt up into the air; the unpredictable movement confused his enemies.

Now that there were more tigers, his opponents seemed to lose the initiative.

All right! Kunai in hand, Sai flew into the maelstrom of battle. *First, this guy...*

He went after the closer man with his kunai.

But in the next instant, his enemy's chakra doubled, swelling up like a sudden flame to envelop his entire body like a robe. The explosion of chakra turned two tigers to ink with the sheer force of the change.

Sai's eyes flew open.

These two weren't just fairly decent ninja. Given the amount of chakra on display, they could easily be jonin class. But what surprised him more than the sudden burst of chakra were the chakra robes blanketing their bodies.

Is that...a tail?

The light purple chakra cloak had grown a tail about thirty centimeters long.

But that was as much observing as he got to do.

Slipping through the attack of the tigers, one of the ninja closed the distance between him and Sai. Before Sai even had the chance to blink, he was tangled up in some close-range martial arts fighting. He exchanged punches and kicks and kunai with his enemy.

The other man abruptly bent over and swept his legs out. On the receiving end of the sweeping kick, Sai tumbled to the ground.

The enemy was on top of him immediately, plunging his kunai downward. Unable to dodge, Sai watched the tip pierce his chest. Instantly, his body turned back into ink.

Having used his ink self as a pawn, the real Sai appeared and threw himself into a counterattack. He danced through the air to land a solid kick on the back of an enemy still bewildered by the abrupt disappearance of his clone.

A perfect hit. His enemy went flying, tumbling to the ground several meters away. He then pulled himself to his feet, but didn't move to counterattack. Instead, he leapt backward and started to run away. The chakra increase gave him swift feet.

Go after him, or... Sai's eyes flew to his other opponent.

Apparently, being left alone to take on four tigers was no easy ride. His enemy appeared to have defeated two of the inked beasts, but the remaining two had him pinned to the ground. The chakra robe had disappeared.

Sai gave up on the fleeing man and walked over to the man pinned to the ground.

Belly to the earth, the man turned his face to the side and let out a pained groan. Beneath the mask, Sai could see eyes glaring at him. But those eyes also contained a hint of fear.

"Who are you?" Sai asked.

The man didn't answer.

“If you answer honestly, I’ll take that into consideration when deciding what to do with you after the inquiry,” he said, but that was just bait. Sai had no authority alone to decide what to do with the man.

“R-really...?” the man said, hoarsely. Which was followed immediately by a strange cry of “Oh!” and his eyes flying open.

The man’s entire body was quickly racked with convulsions, so strong as to almost break free of the tigers pressing him down.

“What’s wrong?!” Sai returned the tigers to ink and crouched down beside the man.

His breathing was shallow and growing distant. He was trying to say something, but his voice didn’t quite become a voice; it was simply a creaking sound in his throat.

“Hey!” He reached out to touch the man and understood the danger. On the nape of the man’s neck, a pattern like Sanskrit characters popped up.

Crap, this guy’s—

Sai leapt backward as if shoved by an invisible giant as the man’s body exploded, blood and flesh and bone scattering.

Sai quietly let out his breath in the place where he landed.

It wasn’t at all unusual for a ninja who had fallen at the hand of an enemy to end their own life to avoid having their information stolen by the enemy through torture or visual jutsu. There were also some who feared dissection after death and chose to die in an explosion instead.

Of course, Sai thought resignedly. Doesn’t look like this is going to be an easy case.

2

When they arrived at Sunagakure, Sasuke was there—at the entrance to the village, in a turban and a coat, waiting for her.

Coincidences do happen, though.

Or maybe it wasn’t a coincidence, but the power of Sakura’s feelings bringing

about an inevitable reunion.

“Sasuke!”

Sakura raced over to him. For a moment, she was concerned that Ino wasn’t there, but her joy at seeing him again was greater and she quickly forgot all about it.

“How’ve you been?” he asked.

“Good! You? How’s your arm?”

“Nothing to worry about. I’m getting used to it. It’s working pretty well.” Sasuke moved the prosthetic arm made from Hashirama’s cells for her.

“Make sure to say something right away if anything feels weird, okay? I’ll take a look at it.”

“Yeah, thanks,” he said, and patted her on the head. The gesture alone made her so happy, she very nearly stopped breathing. She wondered again where Ino was. After all, Sasuke was finally here with them.

“Looks like you’re really working hard, huh, Sakura? Doing all this stuff to take care of kids’ minds.”

“I’m surprised you know about that, Sasuke.”

“Yeah, well, we’re from the same class, after all. I just wondered what you were up to while I was gone from the village. Actually.” He paused for a moment. “I wasn’t wondering just because we’re from the same class. I had another reason.”

“What?”

He looked at her. Their eyes met; he held her gaze.

“Sakura,” Sasuke said.

She was surprisingly calm.

I’m not a child anymore. I don’t get so worked up anymore. I’ve been waiting for this moment for so long...

“Sakura.”

“Sasuke...”

She felt a slight breeze on her cheeks. Strange. There was no wind. If the wind was blowing, then the sand around them would be moving, but it was not. And yet Sakura felt a breeze.

She soon understood the cause of this strange sensation. Sakura’s mind was attempting to pull itself back to reality from a dream.

Standing face-to-face with Sasuke at the entrance to Sunagakure was a dream; the real Sakura was napping in the woods, not yet arrived in the sandy village. And the wind was caressing her cheeks while she slept.

On the border between dream and reality, Sakura panicked.

I don’t want to wake up. I want to stay with Sasuke. I want to hear what he’s going to say next. Sasuke’s—

Sakura opened her eyes.

It was night. She was in the woods. Thanks to the light of the moon, it wasn’t totally dark. Ino was napping nearby. Today was the third day since they had left Konohagakure. It was only a little farther to Sunagakure once they made it through this forest, and since the sun was setting they had decided not to push themselves.

When they entered the woods in the evening, they made a simple meal of their rations, and quickly decided to rest for a while. If they had been in a war zone they would have taken turns napping as a precaution, but now they only set barrier-type tags around them to detect any enemies. Fortunately, the tags had not reacted even once during their journey.

Inside her head, the echoes of her dream lingered.

The fact that Sasuke had shown up in her dream made her happy and sad all at once. The sadness was the greater part, the way she felt his absence all the more keenly when she woke up.

The sigh slipped out naturally.

A dream like that, she thought. I guess I am panicking a little, maybe.

While they traveled, Ino had told her about Shikamaru and Temari. And about

Choji and Karui. And about how Ino herself liked Sai now.

All these different loves were sprouting and growing around her.

Sakura knew it was pointless to think about it happening sooner or later for whoever. Finding love wasn't a winner-takes-all competition.

But still, in her heart, she felt a frustration that resembled panic.

I hope it's a dream that comes true, Sakura thought, suddenly. The dream I just had comes true, and Sasuke is there when we arrive in Sunagakure tomorrow or something.

"Or not," she murmured out loud, and laughed softly.

Her sigh was carried off by the wind.

∞

The next day, Sakura and Ino arrived at Sunagakure right on schedule.

Coming to meet them were the senior members of the Sunagakure medical team.

"You must be tired," an older man with a wonderful beard said. "After you've rested a bit, we'd love to hear what you have to say, if you don't mind."

"That should be fine. We're looking forward to it," Sakura replied, and the man with the beard led them to the village hospital.

They were shown to a large multipurpose room. After they had relaxed for a short time, the meeting attendees, apparently medical personnel, started trickling in.

Sakura spoke first to the twenty or so people gathered there about the children's therapy center in Konohagakure, the problem points in setting it up, and the current results.

No matter how many times she did it, she could never quite get used to speaking in front of a large group, but thanks to Ino stepping in from time to time to offer additional information, the talk went very smoothly.

When she was finished, it was time for the group to exchange opinions and ideas. Because of differences in village cultures and administrative systems,

Sunagakure couldn't simply adopt Konoha's methods as they were, but the senior-level ninja remarked that if they made some adjustments before introducing the system, they would likely see significant results in Suna as well.

The entire meeting, including the exchange of opinions, was over in about two hours.

Once the attendees left, the bearded man who had shown them to the room in the first place came over.

"I apologize for asking this of you when I know you must be tired, but could I ask you to take the trouble of visiting the Lord Kazekage? He says he wishes to speak with you. Lady Temari is also with him."

"Certainly, we'd be delighted."

"After all, to come all the way to Suna and not see those two!" Ino said, and laughed.

"Well then, please come this way." The bearded man stood up and began walking. His expression was hard somehow, which made Sakura curious.

They left the hospital and headed toward the center of the village until they came across a spherical building, the character for "wind" inscribed on one wall.

Sakura and Ino were shown inside. In the center of the large room was a round table, before which Gaara sat. Temari stood beside him.

"I've brought the Konoha ninja," the bearded man said, and at Gaara's nod, he bowed and left the room.

"Sakura, Ino, thank you for this," Gaara said.

"Gaara, Temari, how have you been?" Sakura asked.

"Very well." Gaara nodded.

Temari simply replied, "Good."

Both of them seemed unhappy. Gaara was basically always wearing his poker face, but his countenance that day had a faint hint of severity to it.

"Um...has something happened?" Ino asked.

After exchanging a glance with Temari, Gaara turned back to Ino and Sakura.

“Uchiha Sasuke was in the village.”

3

Sakura’s eyes flew open. “Really?!”

What? That dream. It can’t actually be coming true?

For a moment, a smile very nearly floated up onto her lips, but from Gaara’s tone and expression, she assumed that this situation was not all smooth sailing and kept her grin in check.

“Sasuke’s here?”

“Why?”

Sakura and Ino gave voice to their questions simultaneously.

Gaara clasped his hands together on top of the round table and let out a deep breath.

“I’m not quite sure where to start. I suppose it would be best to simply tell you what happened as it happened,” he said. “Two days ago, Uchiha Sasuke contacted terrorists hiding themselves in our village.”

“What?!” Ino shouted, her voice wild. “Hold on a minute. Why would Sasuke talk to terrorists—”

“Ino.” It was Temari who interrupted her. “Gaara will talk first. Save your questions for after.”

“Sorry.”

Gaara nodded and continued. “Two days ago, members of the Anbu and I surrounded the terrorist base. Normally, the leader of the village would not directly accompany such missions, but the situation being what it is...”

The terrorists were originally ninja from Sunagakure, but they opposed Gaara’s appointment as Kazekage and left the village to form an antigovernment group. For a long time, Gaara hadn’t been able to pin down their location, but a month or so earlier one of the Anbu had discovered their base, and the group had been placed under Anbu monitoring.

The group had made a move about a week earlier.

A lone man visited their base to talk with the terrorist leader. The member of the Anbu on monitoring duty had reported that the man visiting the base soon exited the tent and disappeared.

The meeting had been so short that the Anbu hadn't been able to eavesdrop on their conversation. But a concerning report from one of the Anbu was brought to Gaara.

"The man who appeared at the base very strongly resembled Uchiha Sasuke of Konoha."

Sasuke quietly drew a sharp breath. But her questions would have to wait.

"I thought that it was a mistake, an accidental resemblance," Gaara remarked. "But I was reluctant to simply dismiss the matter so easily. So I decided to join the Anbu the next day on their monitoring mission."

Gaara would have been able to peek inside the tent with his sand eye, and if he manipulated the sand, it was an easy matter to plant a listening device.

A few days after he joined the monitoring team, Uchiha Sasuke appeared at the terrorist base. Once he was there, he began negotiating with the terrorist leader.

"Sasuke pushed at the leader and demanded that they become his subordinates."

"Subordinates?" Ino furrowed her brow.

Gaara nodded. "Sasuke came to them with the idea that they become his subordinates and help him destroy Konoha. If they did, he would help them with their own terrorist attacks."

"But that's—!" Sakura cried out reflexively.

Gaara ignored her. "The terrorist rejected Sasuke's demands. So the negotiations broke down. But rather than leaving then and there, Sasuke killed the terrorist leader. He said he couldn't let him live now that he knew Sasuke's plan to destroy Konoha."

Witnessing this with his sand eye, Gaara had given the order for the Anbu to charge in. A melee soon broke out between terrorists and Anbu, and in the

midst of the chaos, Sasuke escaped. Gaara took off in pursuit, but at some point Sasuke hid his chakra, and Gaara lost him.

“This happened two days ago.”

Sakura closed her eyes. But her mouth didn’t open. Silence descended on the room.

“Hey, wait a minute,” Ino said, finally, half-laughing. “You think we’d believe a story like that?” The situation was simply too far from reality.

Sakura could empathize with how she felt.

A family’s tragedy. A hatred that made him want to leave the village. Sasuke overcame this; he was their friend, he fought with them in the Great Ninja War. Why would Sasuke now need to join up with terrorists and plot revenge on Konoha? She would never have expected this of him.

“Hey, Gaara, you’re *completely* sure that it was Sasuke?” Sakura asked.

“Right,” Ino said. “I mean, like, with a transformation technique or something, someone could have turned into Sasuke...”

“I’d like to believe that myself. But it’s hard to imagine that’s the case.” Gaara shook his head lightly. “Even if someone were able to use a transformation technique to resemble him, they wouldn’t be able to make their chakra the same color and type. The Sasuke I saw at the base two days ago had the exact same chakra as the Sasuke I know so well.”

“I’m sure I heard about a ninja in the Konoha Anbu who can mimic chakra. Any connection there?” Temari said.

Sakura had also heard about the existence of such a ninja. But that ninja probably had nothing to do with this.

“I don’t think so,” Sakura replied. “Sasuke has no point of contact with that ninja, and I don’t know why he would do such a thing in the first place.”

“In that case, there’s a very good possibility that the Sasuke who Gaara saw is the real Sasuke.”

“Temari! How can you say—”

“I’m just stating a fact,” Temari said, turning sharp eyes on Ino.

“White Zets—” Sakura started to say, and quickly dismissed it. “No, of course not.”

“I thought that for a minute too,” Gaara said. “It also had the ability to mimic chakra. But given that Otsutsuki Kaguya has been destroyed, I can’t imagine it survived.”

“So then...what about the possibility of Impersonation Jutsu?” Sakura asked. She had read in the Archive Library that the leader of Akatsuki, Pain, had used this jutsu, a technique to split a person’s chakra with a vessel, which the person then controlled as if it were their own body.

“True, that jutsu could explain why his face and his chakra were the same. But Pain’s gone. And if there were someone else who could use that technique, that still leaves the problems of why Sasuke would be in touch with such a person and why he would let that person make a copy of him.”

Gaara was right. Even if the Sasuke he had seen was a copy instead of the real Sasuke, that didn’t clear Sasuke from suspicion.

“Can you get in touch with him?” Gaara asked. “I heard he left on a journey.”

Sakura shook her head helplessly. “There are these contact spots all over where we can leave a message, but...”

“But we don’t know when he would get to them,” Ino picked up where Sakura left off.

“Suna has no intention of leaking this matter to the outside. We plan to take care of it internally. The only people who know about it are the members of the Anbu assigned to this mission, along with Temari and a few senior ninja, and me. The terrorists we arrested at the base are also currently imprisoned, so no information will get out of the village.”

“There’s no way Uchiha Sasuke would try and join up with terrorists. Gaara and I think so too,” Temari said. “To begin with, I have a hard time believing that Sasuke would be so sloppy as to abruptly demand anyone be his subordinate in a negotiation.”

Sakura nodded.

“Sakura, Ino. I think you should hurry back home and ask Kakashi for his judgment,” Gaara said. “Although I do really wish you could have a bit more of a leisurely stay, since you’ve come all the way to Suna.”

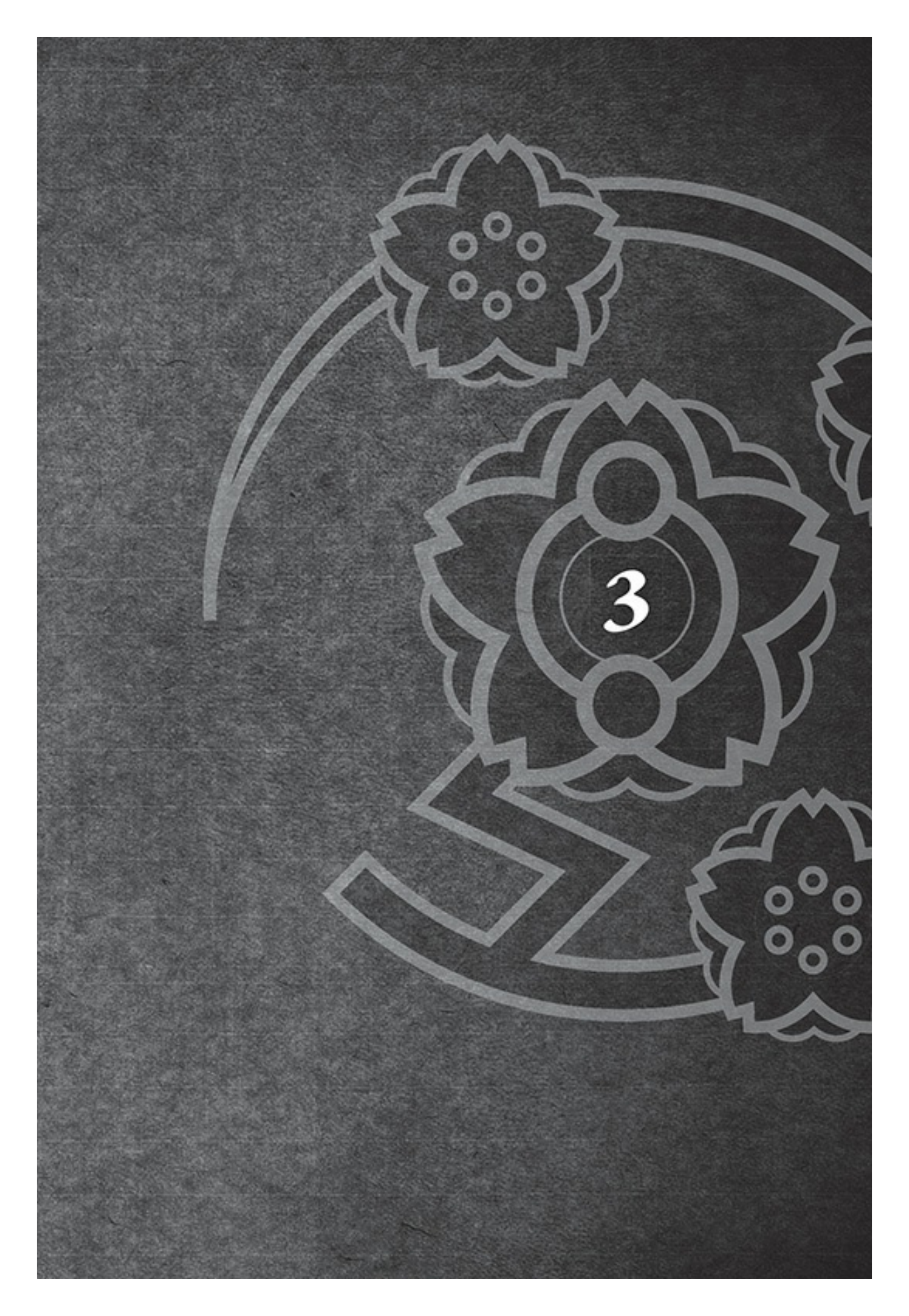
Naturally, Sakura intended to return to the village. Coming to Sunagakure, she had had a lot of things she wanted to do. She wanted to learn more about the medical system in the village, and there was a specialist she wanted to talk with about poison research.

But right now, returning to Konoha was their priority.

“I’ll send a messenger falcon to Kakashi outlining the situation. I’d go myself and explain the situation, but given my position as head of the village, I can’t exactly leave so easily.”

“I understand.”

We took four days to come, but we’ll make it home in three, Sakura told herself.



3

Chapter 3

1

“It’s been a year and a half since Haruno Sakura proposed and launched the children’s therapy center, and they are seeing definite results. I believe they should receive a greater share of the budget for the next term.”

At this statement from Kakashi, the daimyo at the head of the table stroked his chin thoughtfully. His face said he was thinking, but Kakashi knew that he wasn’t actually setting his brain to any kind of real work. His only thought was likely a prayer that the boring meeting would soon end.

This particular boring meeting was at the daimyo’s mansion, mostly to discuss budget allocations. In addition to the daimyo, the land’s senior officials, the Hokage Kakashi, advisors Homura and Koharu, and senior members of the Anbu were in attendance. Shizune was also present as a senior member of the medical team.

“I’d like to hear a few more details about this from Haruno Sakura, but she’s currently not in the village, is that right?” It was Koharu who spoke.

Kakashi nodded. “She’s gone to Suna with Yamanaka Ino. She wanted to report the current status of the children’s therapy center to Suna’s medical personnel and exchange ideas with them.”

“If a similar system is introduced in Suna or some other village, we might be able to do collaborative research,” Shizune added, from the seat next to Kakashi. “In which case, we believe we will be able to provide even more comprehensive care for the children.”

“What will you do about the budget for the Anbu?” came a flat interjection from a man sitting diagonally across from Kakashi—Tsumiki Kido, senior Anbu member and leader of several teams. He was about the same age as Kakashi. He had a distinctive face, with an aquiline nose and sharp eyes. Next to him was a man named Magire, an aide of sorts.

“The therapy center has been given more than sufficient funds,” Kido continued. “If they have really seen solid results, then it would seem to me that

they have no need of a larger budget, hmmm?”

The sticky tail end of his sentence was hard on the ears.

“They need funds to maintain the system and further develop it,” Shizune said, sharply.

“Well then, I would appreciate it if we could also consider the maintenance and development of the Anbu,” Kido said, and turned his gaze on Kakashi. His eyes were cold. “Kakashi—excuse me, Hokage. There has been a downward trend in terms of the budget allocated to the Anbu these past two years. Is this, in the end, really the correct choice, I wonder.”

“At the very least, I think it is,” Kakashi replied.

“Ha ha ha!” Kido laughed theatrically. “I wouldn’t think those were the words of the Hokage, hmm? The Anbu are under the direct control of the Hokage. That the Hokage himself would try to pare down their budget! And you yourself are a former Anbu member, are you not?”

“I’m saying we have priorities.”

“So taking care of children is more important than the Anbu? I honestly can’t understand that. I can’t. In the first place,” Kido raised his voice. “This method of children recovering from mental trauma through talk therapy is interminable. And for that, you are training specialists. It’s so circuitous. If you’re going to treat them, simply give them some medication and free them from the symptoms of their issues.”

“Sure, medication’s another way of doing it. But the idea here is not to pick one or the other,” Kakashi noted.

“Magire.” Shizune spoke to the man at Kido’s side. “You’re a medical ninja, yes? Do you share Kido’s way of thinking?”

Magire turned his face toward his interlocutor. With his pale coloring and monocle, he gave the impression of being the academic type. “I have no intention of denying the fact that you are relieving the anxieties of the children through therapy, but considering the efficiency and certainty, I have concluded that treatment through dispensation of medication is more rational. That is all.” He turned to face forward once more.

“Efficiency. Rational.” Kido picked up where his aide left off. “Those are good words, in fact. That is what medical treatment and budgets should be. There’s a limit to how much money there is, and I believe it should be allocated to those things that are truly for the sake of the village, hmm?”

“We’re in a time of peace. The world’s not in any kind of emergency situation,” Kakashi noted. “I personally don’t feel the need to set aside such a large amount of money for the Anbu these days.”

“‘In times of peace, prepare for war,’ as the old saying goes. It’s precisely because we are in a time of peace that we must assume that there will be unrest again in the world. And—” Kido cut himself off, as if to lend an air of importance to his words. He then persisted with a cold smile. “Are we really able to say that we are at peace right now? Everyone here is aware that the daimyo and Master Homura were assaulted the other day. Naturally, the Anbu must shoulder the blame for that, given that we were not able to fulfill our duty to protect the daimyo. However, this is precisely why I believe that strengthening the Anbu is an urgent matter. Is it not?”

Clever presentation, that. Kakashi was a bit daunted. But Kido was, in fact, correct; Kakashi couldn’t find any fault to quibble over.

“Well, I think Kido’s making a sensible request...” The daimyo trailed off and turned his gaze toward Homura. *You decide* was written all over his face.

Arms crossed, doubtful look on his face, Homura let out a long breath. “I’m at fault too for letting those thugs get the jump on me. I realize this sounds like an excuse, but the men who attacked me were fairly competent. I have to admit that an ominous wind has been blowing through the village.”

Homura looked first at Kido, then Kakashi, before continuing. “We put together the budget for the next term with a priority on strengthening the Anbu system. Acceptable?”

2

The meeting over, Kakashi had just returned to the Hokage’s office when Sai came in.

It was evening. An orange afterglow poured into the room.

“I was attacked earlier,” Sai said, once Kakashi was seated at his desk.

“What?” Sai’s words erased his exhaustion from the meeting.

Sai informed the Hokage that on his way back from speaking with his informer and asking him to find the top-level people Sai had selected from the Bingo Book, he had been attacked by two masked men.

“They were strong. I wanted to at least secure one of them, but...”

One had fled, the other had blown himself up.

“Self-destructed...”

“But it wasn’t a self-destruction he was prepared for,” Sai asserted.

Kakashi gaped at him.

“At one point, I secured the man and attempted to question him. I gave him some bait: if he talked, I’d take his cooperation into consideration when dealing with him later. But when he started to say something...”

Something unusual happened to his body and he exploded.

“There was something like a curse mark on the back of his neck. I think that’s what triggered it.”

Kakashi brought his hand to his chin. Trying to speak, triggering a curse mark—it reminded him of a certain someone.

“It sounds like Danzo, doesn’t it? That whole thing,” Kakashi said.

Sai nodded. “It did actually resemble the method he used to bind us.”

Shimura Danzo had once ruled the Anbu from behind the scenes. He fought Sarutobi Hiruzen for the seat of the third Hokage and lost. After that, he created an independent organization within the Anbu called Root and schemed to rule the village. Sai had been a member of Root.

Danzo embedded curse marks on the tongues of Sai and the others in Root. The effect was that the instant they tried to say anything about Root or Danzo, they would become paralyzed and unable to speak.

“So then the men who attacked you were also bound by their boss’s will. Although the effect’s totally different. I mean, self-destruction versus paralysis.”

“And there’s one more thing,” Sai said. “In the middle of the fight, my attackers were suddenly cloaked in Tailed Beast chakra.”

“Tailed—” Kakashi’s eyes flew open. “Really?”

“Yes. The men themselves didn’t transform into Tailed Beasts, but their chakra increased explosively to become a robe that covered their bodies. And on that chakra robe—it was small, but it was a tail.”

Kakashi groaned. “How does someone who’s not a jinchuriki get the power of a Tailed Beast?”

“And both of them.”

“If we’d been able to examine the body, we might have learned something, but he self-destructed.”

“Which could also mean that someone didn’t want us to be able to examine it, so they set the curse mark for an explosive death.”

Kakashi closed his eyes and racked his brain. Danzo’s way of doing things, the timing of the attack on Sai, and the meeting earlier—Kakashi’s intuition was telling him something.

“Sai, did you talk to anyone about the fact that you were looking into this matter?” he asked.

“No, no one. Why do you ask?”

“If you didn’t talk to anyone, then why were you attacked?”

“What?”

“The enemy found out you were looking into this and attacked you to prevent that. So then, where did they get that information? They couldn’t have just happened to overhear you talking with your informer and decided to attack you in a panic.”

“That wouldn’t have been possible. I take every precaution when I contact an informer.”

“Then that means the enemy knew you were looking into this before you went to see the informer.”

Sai fell silent at Kakashi's words. Finally, a small "oh" slipped out of him. "After you gave me the order here, I went to the Anbu reference room to look into the incidents."

"The Anbu reference room?"

"Yes. There's a record of me visiting it. Someone could learn from that record that I was interested in these incidents."

"Indeed, they probably could," Kakashi agreed.

"But, Master." Sai lowered his voice. "Then that would mean the perpetrator is someone in the Anbu."

Their eyes met.

"Actually," Kakashi said, "I just got back from a budget meeting with the village government, and it looks like the Anbu's getting a budget increase next term."

"The Anbu is."

"Mm-hmm. Tsumiki Kido from the Anbu touched on these attacks in the meeting too. He stressed how it was urgent to strengthen the Anbu now of all times. Both the daimyo and Master Homura were at the meeting, so he managed to secure a nice budget for his Anbu. You see what I'm getting at here, Sai?"

"Master, that's..." Sai swallowed hard. Apparently, he was seeing the same potential plot as Kakashi.

"The Anbu caused the incidents, and the Anbu got a budget increase by using those incidents as a talking point. Basically, performing a part in their own play."

Sai was speechless.

"Thinking about it like this," Kakashi continued, "all kinds of things start to make sense. That's why the daimyo and his advisor were targeted. If they wanted to stir up a sense of crisis among the upper echelons, then attacking those upper echelons would be the simplest way to do it. And the daimyo's route and the guard plan that day were top secret; only the Anbu knew them. It

would have been hard for anyone outside to find out the details. But if we assume the perpetrator was in the Anbu, then all of that's neatly resolved.

"The method makes sense. A single kunai thrown. And the slashing attack too—shallow, a single long sword. If they had done any more than that, the whole village might have been called up to hunt down the perpetrator. They needed to keep the attacks small enough for that not to happen."

"And Kido did all of that..."

"We can't say that for sure yet," Kakashi cautioned. "But I believe he's guilty."

"Kido was always said to be the person who held Danzo's purse strings. I heard that whenever one of Master Danzo's plans was put into action, the money needed was basically all raised by Kido behind the scenes."

"I've heard that too."

All of Danzo's scheming and plotting—against the Uchiha clan, against Akatsuki—would naturally have required a fairly large sum of money. They had likely paid off people providing information during intelligence activities, and any kind of long-term movement or large-scale infiltration required an equally large financial commitment.

Kakashi didn't know how much of the legitimate Anbu budget had been diverted to Root, but even with the Anbu budget, Root had to have had several fundraising routes that were Root's alone. Kido had been responsible for one or maybe all of these. He had stood alongside Danzo, so it wasn't a stretch to imagine the two men would have shared the idea of binding their subordinates with a curse mark.

"So the man holding the purse strings for Root comes out onto center stage once Root is gone," Kakashi murmured, turning his gaze back to Sai. "Would you focus on Kido? Right now, he's our best suspect."

"Understood."

"But if you feel you're in the slightest danger, pull back immediately. Our enemy's failed in an attack against you once already. They'll come at you even more seriously next time."

“All right.” Sai nodded and instantly disappeared from before the desk.

Once the younger man had left his office, Kakashi leaned back in his chair and stared up at the ceiling. “Lot of things going on right now for some reason,” he muttered to himself, before a communication ninja came running in.

“Lord Hokage. A falcon has come with an urgent message from Suna,” she said and handed him a small scroll before racing out again.

He opened up the scroll.

On it: Uchiha Sasuke had appeared in Sunagakure, made contact with terrorists. After negotiating, he had killed a terrorist.

“Oh, no.” Kakashi shook his head. “This is just too much.”

3

“Stand by?” Ino parroted back.

“Exactly,” Kakashi said, from behind the Hokage’s desk. “Basically, don’t do anything.”

“Don’t do anything? A fake Sasuke’s out there, you know? We’re just going to let him be?” Ino let her anger be seen.

“So then what do you think we should do?” Kakashi retorted. “Go around the village, or maybe even other villages, saying there’s a fake Sasuke and would they happen to know anything about it?”

“Well, that’s...” Ino mumbled.

Sakura and Ino had only just returned from Sunagakure. They had passed through the A-un gates and gone straight to Kakashi.

The falcon released from Sunagakure had arrived two days ago, so Kakashi knew the general overview of the situation. Once Sakura and Ino filled him in on what they’d heard directly from Gaara, Kakashi had announced that they were both to simply stand by.

“It’s best not to make any careless moves right now,” he said. “Or rather, we have too little information to move on.”

“But—”

“We,” Kakashi interrupted Ino. “We know very well that Sasuke wouldn’t do anything like that. But what would happen if someone who didn’t know what kind of person Sasuke is found out about this? People might start spreading false information—Sasuke’s had a change of heart, Sasuke’s a criminal, that sort of thing. Gaara’s decision to tell only the two of you about this and keep it within that village was a good one.”

Which was why Konoha shouldn’t make any moves at that moment, he repeated.

“You too, Sakura. Understood?”

“Er,” Sakura started. “I’m pretty sure there’s a ninja in the Anbu who can mimic chakra, right? I can’t believe he could be involved, though...?”

It was a possibility Sakura herself had rejected when they met with Gaara in Sunagakure, but she asked about it now because she wanted direct confirmation from Kakashi.

“No, no connection there. He does indeed have a jutsu that traces the chakra of his target, but he’s on a long-term mission right now. This is a weird way of saying it, but he has an alibi. So he’s clean,” Kakashi said, firmly.

“Can we contact Sasuke ourselves?” Ino asked.

“Hmm. If we could, that’d be the best thing here, but it’s tough. He tends to move as the spirit wills him, so to speak. We don’t know when he’ll stop at any given contact point, and he’s under no obligation to check in regularly with Konoha.”

“I thought so.” Ino’s face sank.

Sakura looked down at the ground.

They couldn’t get in touch with him. If they started to investigate, word would spread. Which meant that all they could do was watch carefully, just as Kakashi said.

“Of course, if the situation changes, I’ll put you two to work on it,” Kakashi said, and then added, “Oh, one other thing. I have some bad news. Mostly because I don’t have enough muscles to flex. There was a senior level meeting

yesterday, and they ended up chipping away at the budget for the children's therapy center. They're shifting a larger share of the next budget to the Anbu."

"To the Anbu?" Ino asked. "Why would they do that?"

"Look, the daimyo was attacked. And, well...there've been some other suspicious things happening in the village. So the people at the top think we should shore up the Anbu."

"What are these suspicious things?" Ino pressed.

"Sorry, now's a bit... When the time comes, I'll definitely tell you everything." Kakashi held up a hand as if to beg forgiveness.

"Don't move, when the time comes—Master, you're being awfully evasive." Ino frowned.

Kakashi offered a bitter, somehow dejected smile in response. "Don't hold it against me. Things change when you're Hokage."

Once Kakashi dismissed them and sent them home to get some rest, Sakura and Ino left the Hokage's Residence.

"You look pale. Are you okay?" Ino asked, when they parted ways.

Sakura said she was fine, but when she got home and looked in the mirror, she did indeed see a worn face there. Part of it was exhaustion from the nonstop trip to Suna, but more than anything, it was a reaction to what Gaara had told them about Sasuke.

Come on. What are you doing, Sasuke...

But even if she tried to protest, Sasuke was somewhere where her voice couldn't reach. The words she wanted to say but couldn't, the things she wanted to do for him but couldn't, settled inside her, a lump of longing.

She threw herself onto her bed. The cool sensation of the sheets caressed her cheeks before she rolled onto her back.

She touched her forehead with her index and middle fingers.

I'll see you soon.

Thank you...

His words sprang to life in the back of her mind.

But when is soon, Sasuke, she murmured to herself.

4

On the other side of the thick glass, a group of Kido faction medical ninjas were standing and working. Some were shaking test tubes, others measuring this and that, still others packing purple capsules into boxes.

“It’s going well?” Kido asked Magire beside him, as they watched subordinates packing boxes of capsules.

“It is. It appears that we will safely reach this month’s quota,” came Magire’s level voice in return. “That is all,”

The facility was a research institute Kido had built outside of the village. Here, under Magire’s direction, they could research new medications and produce them for distribution. The facility was underground; the building above ground was a brick storehouse, camouflage. Naturally, the only ones who knew about the underground facility were Kido’s faction.

“What’s the state of the culture medium? Is he crying about how he wants to go home?”

“He does not weep. In fact, given that he is being kept half-conscious with medication, the feelings of the culture medium are not apparent. That is all.”

“Is that so?” *Still some bad ones in this world.* Kido grinned as he changed the subject. “Anyway, the budget meeting went well. It was almost anticlimactic.”

“However, Hatake Kakashi may have realized that we were the ones who carried out the attacks on the daimyo and his advisor.”

“It doesn’t matter if he did. Actually, if he was the sort of man who didn’t notice that much at least, he wouldn’t have lived long enough to become Hokage.”

This was not just sour grapes; Kido really believed it didn’t matter if Kakashi suspected them of anything. The attacks on the advisor and the daimyo were, for Kido, nothing more than a test.

A Tailed Beast drug.

The results had been superb. Just as Kido ordered, assassins—abilities enhanced by the Tailed Beast drug—had thrown a kunai next to the daimyo, lightly slashed at the advisor, evaded the pursuing guard ninja, and fled the scene quite admirably. Kido had then used those attacks as a pretext to secure a budget increase for the Anbu.

We can use the Tailed Beast drug. Kido could feel the power of it. And this meant two things: they could use it for the dosed human beings and for political strategy.

But Hatake Kakashi was a serious opponent, one he must not let his guard down around. Kakashi might have had his eyes sleepily half-closed most of the time, but his intuition was sharp when it counted. After all, he already had former Anbu member Sai at work.

“Seems Sai’s still sniffing around at us,” Kido said.

He had sent two assassins after Sai the other day, but received a report that they had failed. One of them had self-destructed, which meant he had likely broken under questioning.

Kido had done the same thing for the attacks on the daimyo and the advisor as well: set curse marks on all the assassins before releasing them. Only the ones who accomplished their mission and returned to him could have that curse released.

“The failure of the other day,” Magire began, “was because my own estimations were incorrect. I sent two people with one tail, but their own skills and chakra were apparently insufficient. That is all.”

“Well, it’s fine, I suppose,” Kido said. “They failed, but it will serve as a warning. And if it comes down to it, we can simply send some with more tails.”

They couldn’t let their plans be set back at this stage.

So much money that the village’s budget paled in comparison...

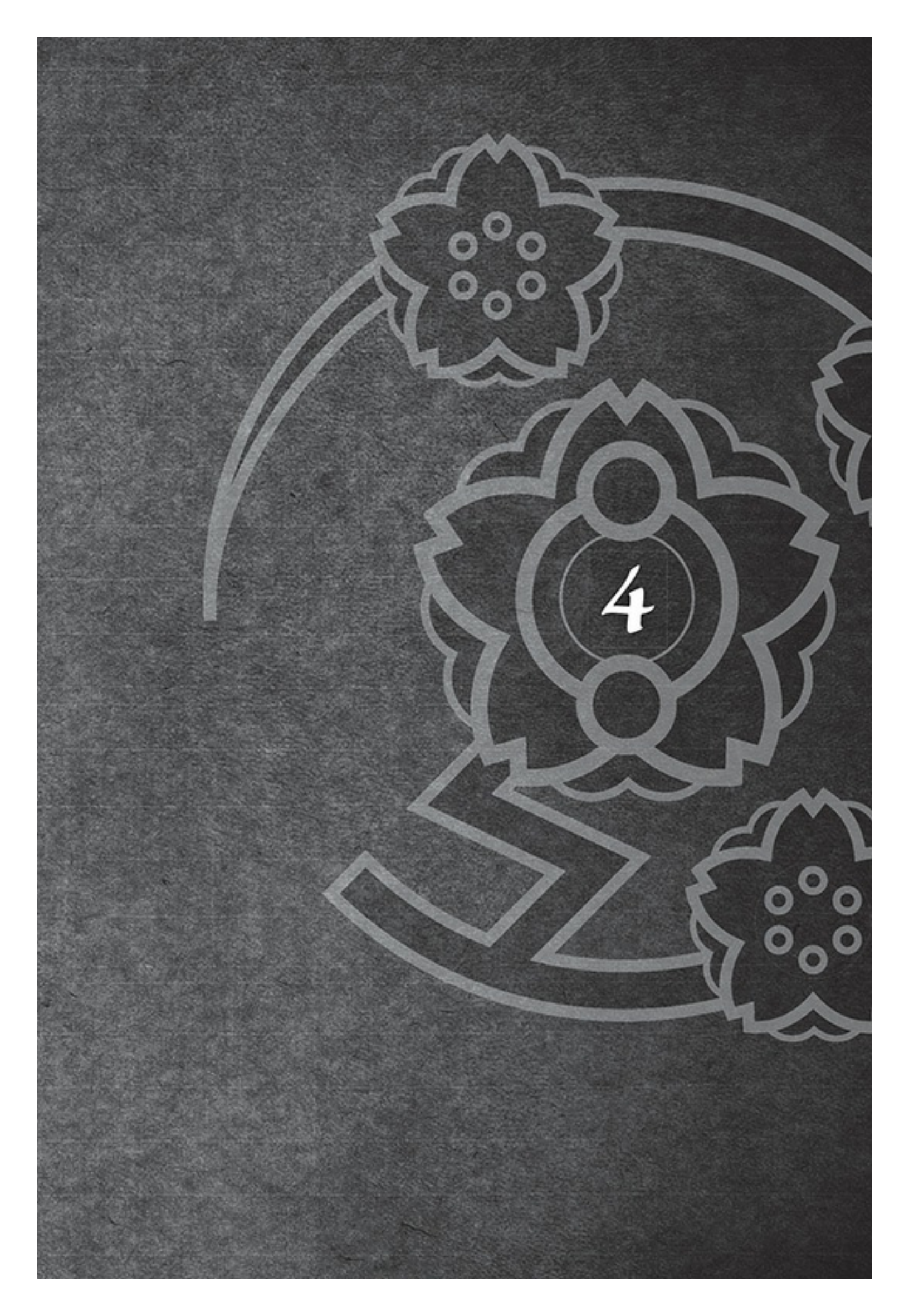
They still had a little ways to go in order to get there.

Pretty great, huh, Kido? Now you can go to the academy like everyone else.

Yeah. Thanks, Dad!

The memory came back to life unbidden in the back of his mind, and Kido's face froze.

"Money. More money..." The curse in his heart found its way to his voice and slipped out of his mouth.



4

Chapter 4

1

Sai began his monitoring of Kido.

He learned that the man often acted together with the medical ninja Magire and that he would sometimes make the rounds of safe houses and training facilities, but he didn't know what Kido was actually doing at any of those places.

Detection tags had been placed around some of the facilities, preventing Sai from casually approaching any of them. It wasn't impossible for him to infiltrate the bases, but then Kido would know he was investigating. And chasing the man too obviously was not a good plan; Kido would only work harder to hide the evidence. Still, if Sai simply watched him from afar, he wouldn't make any headway at all. He needed some kind of entry point.

Three days after he began targeting Kido, Sai noticed a small sign attached to a telephone pole on the side of the road on his way back home; a message from Sai's informer. The meaning of the sign was known only to Sai. The informer wanted to meet with him.

Given that he was currently focused on Kido, there was nothing he particularly wanted to know about the top-level people in the Bingo Book he had asked the informer to investigate. But he had to at least pay for the investigation the man had done.

The next day, Sai met with the informer. This time, it was on the roof of a building in town, rather than in the forest where they had met before.

"The three people you asked me about, Sai? I checked into them, but seems they're all clean," the informer said. "The rogue ninja Tenzen from Kiri has been getting up to no good near Kumogakure this whole past year. And Baraki from the Deceased has been absorbed into a different organization, where he apparently doesn't have the same clout he used to. As for Genba the Soul Remover, he got sick and died about six months ago."

"Right. Thanks," Sai said, and paid the promised fee. "Anything else catch

your attention?”

“Oh, you know, actually.” A meaningful smile spread across the informer’s face. “If you’re asking about big rumors, then I’ve got one. But it’s probably got nothing to do with what you’re looking into.”

“That’s fine. Just tell me.”

“And is there something in it for me?” The informer rubbed his index and middle fingers against his thumb and grinned.

“Depends on what you know,” Sai replied.

“To investigate the whereabouts of the three people you mentioned,” the informer said, “I went round to all sorts of places. And this little tidbit happened to grace my ears: a story about seeing Uchiha Sasuke.”

“Sasuke?” Sai furrowed his brow slightly. “It doesn’t matter if people see him. He’s on a journey right now to atone for his sins.”

“Mm, I know he’s traveling the world right now. But, you see, the story I heard was not that peaceful.”

“Meaning?”

“For instance, things like he attacked a black-market arms dealer in a cave somewhere, or that he was in contact with a criminal organization in the secret village of a certain nation.”

“Why would Sasuke attack an arms dealer?”

“I don’t really know, myself. But according to the person who told me this tale, Sasuke told this arms dealer he was plotting a terrorist attack on Konoha and demanded a lot of ninja tools for cheap. And, well, obviously, his interlocutor refused. I mean, a demand like that. So Sasuke launched an enormous fireball and killed him. Things like that. With the criminal organization too, negotiations broke off in pretty much the same way, with basically the same ending.”

“When was this?”

“I believe it was a week or two ago.”

Sai shook his head. It couldn't be. "Sasuke would never do anything like that. It's some kind of mistake."

"I completely understand. I'm simply telling you what I happened to hear. Ooh, don't give me such a threatening look." The informer ran his hand over his shaved head. "Oh! That and apparently the majority of the next village budget is going to the Anbu."

Perhaps thinking he had displeased Sai, the informer smiled ingratiatingly and continued. "So I suppose someone brought up the matter about the advisor being attacked you're looking into now and made a big speech about the Anbu, hmm?"

"You're a capable informer, you know? Even those details made it to your ears?"

"Heh heh, well, I get around." The informer's eyes turned up at the corners.

Sai wanted to leave the place already, but the informer had more to say.

"However, those Anbu, I don't really understand that organization. I'm sure they do all those assassinations and secret missions implied by the name, but it seems they also do guard duty for important people, as well as investigating the way you are when something happens, right?"

"I'm not on the Anbu register anymore. But, well, it's true the Anbu is tied up in mystery. I mean, I was in it and I don't really understand it."

"And there's this too, right? Once the fighting's over, they go to the battlefield and gather all sorts of documents and things?"

Sai's face pulled into a doubtful frown. "What are you talking about?"

"Don't they have a database of battle records and things? Every now and then, I hear things from people in my line of work, you know. Almost as soon as the Great Ninja War was over, people were seen wearing the masks of Konoha's Anbu around the Final Valley. Apparently, they were taking earth and bits of rock from the area home with them."

Sai cocked his head to one side.

It was true that the missions handled by the Anbu covered a lot more ground

than simply assassinations, but he had never heard anything about bringing dirt home from a battleground.

“You said this was right after the Great Ninja War?”

“Mm-hmm. And what was the name of that bridge? The bridge where Sasuke and Master Danzo—who didn’t quite manage to become the sixth Hokage—fought that person? I’m not talking about the time where the Anbu were investigating around that bridge, either. Which is why I was wondering if the Anbu people also do work like that.”

Sai crossed his arms and kept his silence. Something the informer had mentioned in the flow of his chatter caught Sai’s attention in a strange way.

“Er, Sai?”

“I’ll be in touch,” Sai said, pushing more money into the informer’s hand before leaving.

2

“The situation doesn’t look good,” was the first thing Kakashi said.

Sakura had been summoned to the Hokage’s office along with Ino, with the message that he wanted to talk about Sasuke.

“Not good, Master?” Sakura walked over to his desk.

“Suna’s not the only place Sasuke’s been seen,” Kakashi said. “More than once.”

Sasuke had apparently been in contact with a number of black-market arms dealers and criminal organizations, and in every case he had announced his intention to carry out a terrorist attack on Konoha. When he demanded the help of these various criminals and was refused, he killed them; the same story Gaara had told them.

“Where did you hear this?” Sakura asked.

“Sai. He heard it from an informer.”

“Sai? Why would Sai be talking to an informer?” Ino raised an eyebrow.

“Oh, well, I asked him to look into something for me. This came up when he

was reporting on his progress with that.”

“By ‘look into something,’ you don’t happen to mean what you said before about strange things going on in the village? Is Sai investigating that?” Ino shot off.

“Mmm, well, yes,” Kakashi acknowledged with a wry smile.

“Is he alone? You’re not having him do anything dangerous, right?”

“He’s fine. I told him not to push too hard, and Sai knows how to keep his distance when it comes to things like this. He’s not Naruto,” Kakashi said. He perhaps noticed something in Ino’s constant worrying about Sai’s safety, but he said nothing.

“So Sasuke, then,” Sakura began. “If this keeps up, what will happen to him?”

“If this keeps up, well.” Kakashi cleared his throat before continuing. “He’ll be put on the international wanted list, and people from all over the world will be sent after him.”

Sakura took a sharp breath.

“But, well, it wouldn’t come to that in one go or anything. I expect there’d be a meeting of the five Kage first. Sasuke’s a hero, after all; he saved the world with Naruto. No one’s going to put a man like that on the wanted list without some discussion.”

“So then he’ll be okay?” Ino said, brightly. “I mean, right now, the five Kage are friends. They fought in the Great Ninja War together, so they’ll totally know right away that the Sasuke people are seeing is a fake.”

Can we really be so optimistic as that? The unease in Sakura’s heart only grew at Kakashi’s next words.

“Even if the village chief feels that way, there’s bound to be people in the village who don’t. And the chief is in the position of speaking for the people of the village. If a village starts shouting that Sasuke needs to be eliminated, the five Kage aren’t necessarily going to be on the same page. Some villages might even say we should form groups to go after him.”

“That’s...” Ino’s face clouded over.

“If there is a meeting of the five Kage, please take me with you,” Sakura said, forcefully. “Even if it is a mistake, I can’t let Sasuke be designated a wanted criminal.”

“I know. If a meeting is convened, I’ll bring you. Although, well, if I’m going to be honest, the best thing would be if Sasuke were there to proclaim his own innocence. Where is he and what is he doing?” Kakashi grumbled.

“Have we left messages for him at the contact points?” Ino said.

“Of course. Basically saying a fake Sasuke has shown up, and he needs to get in touch with us now. But no reply yet.”

Ino let out a sigh.

“If Sasuke doesn’t show up,” Sakura said, “then the only thing we can do is prove that the Sasuke people are seeing around now is a fake.”

“True. But can you? The chakra Gaara sensed was Sasuke’s. If there’s a meeting of the five Kage, Gaara will be forced to mention that. And when that happens, me telling them we don’t know how that little trick works is not going to be particularly convincing to the other village chiefs.”

Sakura bit her lip. “Then we’ll just have to prove it,” she said, but her voice was not as strong as her words.

3

The situation was shifting in the direction Kido desired.

The fake Sasuke was, just as Kido had instructed, contacting people who were part of the underworld and killing the people he spoke with, after revealing his intent to commit terrorist acts.

The Kazekage had taken measures to keep any word of the terrorists being killed in Sunagakure from leaking out of his village, but people were gossiping about the many other incidents, and the talk was spreading to all the different regions.

People inevitably talked. The rumors would eventually reach the upper echelons of villages across the land, and then they would come together to discuss just what was to be done about Uchiha Sasuke.

They wouldn't immediately conclude that Sasuke was to be eliminated. Kido knew that too. The village chiefs would never declare someone who had performed such brave deeds in the Great Ninja War a criminal without argument.

But by the time the situation reached that point, the real Uchiha Sasuke should have taken action. The real Sasuke would cut his trip short and return to Konoha for a time.

That was Kido's aim. He had openly set this fake into motion to create a situation that would force the real Sasuke to show himself. Upon his return to his village, Sasuke would be captured by Kido's private army, which had been enhanced with the Tailed Beast drug. And once they captured him— Kido was in a certain place in the village, a safe house. Alone in the office.

A faint smile rose up onto his lips. "Hurry and show yourself, Uchiha Sasuke," he murmured. "You are worth your weight in gold. Gold..."

4

Prove that the Sasuke people had seen was a fake.

That's what she'd said to the Hokage, but even after Sakura set her mind to the problem after returning home, she couldn't think of a way to actually do it. And instead of focusing on how she could prove he was a fake, her thoughts kept turning to why Sasuke didn't come back.

Hurry up and come home, Sasuke.

Tell me that the real you would never do anything like that...

A sliver of anxiety wormed its way into her heart. And that sliver kept her from being able to collect her thoughts, so she simply prayed fervently that she would get to see Sasuke again soon.

This is a waste of time.

Thinking that moving her body might clear her mind as well, Sakura left the house and set out walking without any particular destination. But before she knew it, she was on the academy's doorstep. Perhaps some unconscious desire to get far away from the hustle and bustle of the business district had brought

her here.

In the early afternoon, she could hear the voices of the children at school. She decided to watch them for a bit through the fence.

As she walked around to the schoolyard, she saw children around the age of ten practicing their karate kata in pairs. Then she looked over at the teacher giving the lesson.

Oh! It's Naruto!

"Come on, you guys! Don't just go through the motions. Seriously, you have to actually think about the next attack and get yourself ready!"

She'd heard that Naruto had started teaching at the academy from time to time as a special lecturer after the Great War. And watching him now, he seemed to be doing an excellent job of it.

"Hey! When you're done sparring, make sure you weave the sign of reconciliation! Whether you're strong or weak or whatever, that's a ninja rule."

Students who did not follow the kata etiquette got a rap on the head from Naruto.

You were like that too, way back when, Sakura told him in her head and smiled softly.

Once he had given instruction to all the students, Naruto had them line up and bowed with them.

Raising his head, he noticed Sakura. "Hey!" he called out. "Sakura!"

She waved her hand in a small gesture.

"You guys just wait a sec," Naruto told the children before trotting over to her. "What's up? You got the day off?"

"Mmm, well, I guess it's something like that," Sakura answered. "But look at you. You're quite the teacher, hmm?"

"Right?" Naruto grinned and rubbed the bottom of his nose with a finger. He then clapped his hands together. "Oh, hey! You're here now, why don't you give it a go too? Teach them their kata."

“What? No, I’m good.”

“Come on, just for a minute. Show them the incredible techniques of a lady ninja with superhuman strength!”

“Now look, you can just stop with the ‘superhuman’ thing—”

“Hey! Guys! A super amazing guest teacher’s come by for you today!” Naruto turned toward the children and shouted, without sparing a second for Sakura’s protests. “Check it out! Superhuman lady ninja teacher, Haruno Sakura!”

“And now you say it a second time!” Just as Sakura shot off this retort, the children joined their voices as one.

“Thank you very much, superhuman teacher!”

“See? This is because you shoot your mouth off!” Sakura said with a snort, but Naruto paid her no mind.

“Hurry up!” he called, returning to the children.

Honestly, this guy...

But now that he had set her up, all Sakura could do was go and teach for a bit. Shaking her head, she stepped into the schoolyard.

When she actually got in there with the children and instructed them on their kata, she noticed that her spirits were unexpectedly lighter.

It was a technical sort of instruction, but the children were all at different levels, so she had to change her method for each child she spoke with. Some digested what she said so quickly it was surprising, while others still couldn’t do it after being told several times. All of it was the individuality of the children.

As she demonstrated the kata, she thought of how to phrase her instructions to meet the needs of each student. Using both her body and her brain like this, she could feel the stagnation blocking her heart these past few days melting away. She was entirely absorbed in teaching until the bell rang.

At the end of the lesson, Naruto made the students line up. “You guys did good. So to finish up, today’s guest teacher, Miss Haruno Sakura, has something very special to say. Listen up.”

“Huh?!” Having been abruptly tossed the baton like this, Sakura was baffled. “H-hold on a minute. What are you talking about?”

“Anything’s fine. Just a few words from a graduate to the kids coming up.”

“Miss Sakura, please be brief,” one of the students said, and those around her laughed. Even in this day and age, there was always someone looking for laughs.

Dammit, Naruto!

Glaring at him out of the corner of her eye, Sakura desperately racked her brains for what to say.

“Er, what should I say? I wasn’t expecting this, so I really will keep it short.”

With the children staring directly at her, Sakura continued, “It was so much fun doing this lesson with you all today. The kata are the foundation of ninja fighting, so don’t neglect them. Practice them a lot, okay?”

To bring things to a close, she said, “And maybe some of you already know about this, but as a medical ninja, I created something called the children’s therapy center. It’s a place where kids who have been through some tough times and are maybe hurting can come and work on getting past that hurt with us. Minds are tricky things, you know. It’s only natural that we can’t know what other people are thinking and feeling, but sometimes we don’t even understand what’s going on in our own minds. We can train with a partner to make our bodies stronger, but how do we make our minds stronger? I want you all to become ninja with strong bodies, of course, but also strong minds. So to make that happen, please fail a lot, please do a lot of embarrassing things, and, well, love a lot of people. If you do, I’m sure...”

∞

“Hup!”

“Thanks.” Sakura took the can of juice Naruto offered.

After the lesson was over, they had gone to a park near the academy. Sitting side by side on a bench, they drank their juice.

“Hey, thanks for helping out with the lesson, Sakura.”

“Sure. It was fun for me too. A nice change of pace.”

“Glad to hear it.”

“But I honestly was surprised, you know. You really have the makings of a great teacher, Naruto.”

“Heh heh. I guess it’s just I was always falling behind, so I totally get how the kids who can’t do it feel, y’know?”

“Right.”

“But I mean, you! You were so great. I just come and teach at the academy sometimes, but you’re actually really working with kids in a real way, right?”

“Not at all. Not me.” Sakura shook her head. Being complimented directly like this was hard somehow. Finishing off the last of her juice, she sighed. “I’m a disaster. I told the kids back there to be ninja with strong minds too, but I’m basically the worst at that right now.”

“Something happen?” Naruto said, and tossed his empty juice can into a garbage can several meters away.

Sakura watched the perfect shot and suddenly felt like telling him everything. “So, Sasuke, okay?”

“Sasuke?”

“People have been seeing Sasuke all over lately. But—”

She hesitated for a second about whether or not it was all right for her to talk with him about it. But in the end, she did. He was going to hear about it sooner or later anyway, and she’d rather he heard it from her.

Naruto listened to the whole story without interrupting. And then he said, “Huh, that so? So that’s what’s happening.” His tone was light, without a hint of seriousness, and Sakura felt somehow letdown.

“‘That so?’ You’re not surprised?”

“Why would I be? I mean, that Sasuke’s a fake, right?”

“He is, but...” Sakura was slightly dissatisfied with his lack of a reaction. She thought he would be surprised or angry or get excited or show a little more

emotion of some kind.

“If it’s a fake, then no need to worry. Don’t get too hung up on it, Sakura.”

“But we still don’t know who would make a fake like this or why, you know?”

“I’m telling you, it’s fine,” Naruto said, and smiled at her.

Sakura sighed. “Somehow, talking to you, I end up feeling like I was so silly for worrying like crazy about it. And Sasuke, he hasn’t answered any of the messages we’ve sent—”

“There, that!” Naruto suddenly shouted.

“What? Why are you shouting?”

“Sasuke’s not answering, so I’m not worried either.”

“I totally do not understand.”

“Okay, look.” He scratched his head as if trying to figure out how to put it before continuing. “The fact that he hasn’t come back to the village even though there’s some fake of him hanging around means he doesn’t think it’s a big deal either.”

“Sasuke doesn’t?” Sakura murmured. *He doesn’t think it’s a big deal...*

“If he was here, he’d say, ‘Don’t call me to the village over something so trivial. You guys take care of it,’” Naruto said, imitating Sasuke.

Sakura burst out laughing. And then, as if the fog had cleared away, she realized Naruto was right. What was she moping around for? She switched tracks from her negative thoughts and sat up straighter.

“Right. That’s it, isn’t it?”

The fact that Sasuke hadn’t come back to the village was because Sasuke himself didn’t see the current matter as particularly serious. It was a very Naruto-like, simple, clear-cut opinion, but his words were exactly what Sakura needed at that moment.

A smile naturally spread across her lips.

“It’s the best when you smile, Sakura, y’know?” Naruto said, and grinned wide enough to show his teeth.

Sakura took a deep breath. It was a sign of how her mood had changed that even the air tasted good.

“Thanks, Naruto,” she said, standing up. “I feel better after talking to you.”

“Heh heh heh,” Naruto laughed. “But, y’know, Sakura, that Sasuke’s such a headache. I mean, always giving you trouble like this.”

Naruto playing at the big brother was so ridiculous that Sakura burst out laughing again.

5

The day after she talked with Naruto, Sasuke reached out to Tsunade and said she wanted her advice.

Just past noon, the two women squeezed into a table at a restaurant and faced each other.

Tsunade already knew Sasuke had been seen in a variety of places. It might have been a while since she stepped down as village chief, but Kakashi sent subordinates from time to time to keep her informed of important matters.

“The Sasuke people are seeing simply can’t really be him. But Gaara said he had the same chakra. And I can’t think of anything plausible to explain that,” Sakura said.

“Hmm.” Tsunade crossed her arms. “A method of mimicking not just face and body, but also chakra...”

“Apparently, there’s a shinobi in the Anbu who uses a jutsu like that, but he’s off on a mission right now. He doesn’t seem to have anything to do with any of this. Do you have any ideas, Master?”

Chakra couldn’t be copied with transformation jutsu, and the user of a shape-shifting jutsu couldn’t make a copy of any kind unless they had access to Sasuke.

“It’s a tough one,” Tsunade said, after a few moments of silence. “I can’t think of anything off the top of my head other than what you just suggested. It’s not as though White Zetsu survived, after all.”

“I don’t think he did.”

Silence descended on the table.

Finally, after wetting her lips with sake, Tsunade offered, “Still, the most likely option is shape-shifting jutsu.”

“But in that case, there would be a connection between the user and Sasuke.”

“Mmm. His own chakra would have to be split and given to the copy. But if the user somehow managed to absorb Sasuke’s chakra without him noticing it and gave it to the copy, that could create a situation in which the fake ran rampant without Sasuke’s being aware of it.”

“Without Sasuke noticing?”

“Right. But that wouldn’t happen.” Tsunade rejected the idea immediately. “It’s hard to think of a situation where someone as skilled as Sasuke would have his chakra absorbed without him knowing it.”

“That’s true.” Sasuke nodded slightly. But she felt like it was worth pushing and digging deeper into this idea of Tsunade’s.

The fact that the fake had Sasuke’s face and body was no serious problem. The transformation jutsu itself was not particularly high level. The real issue was that the chakra was the same. And just as Tsunade noted, chakra could be absorbed from an opponent and passed on to someone else. Transferring, substituting, moving—these things were all possible with chakra.

So there had been a transfer of Sasuke’s chakra without Sasuke’s knowing about it.

What sort of trick would be involved in something like that? Sakura had the feeling her fingertips had finally touched upon something after groping around in the dark.

“Without he himself realizing it,” she murmured, and then looked down at the ground, concentrating hard. As she gently tucked behind her ears the hair hanging down on both sides of her face, she had a sudden flash of insight. “Hair...”

“What’s the matter?” Tsunade looked dubious.

“Master Tsunade,” Sakura said. “Hypothetically speaking, would it be possible

to extract a person's chakra from something like their hair or skin?"

"Hair?" Tsunade said. "Well, I suppose it's not *impossible*. Although it would be an extremely small amount. Basically, as long as the material contained some component of the person, in theory, it's possible. In that sense, you wouldn't be limited to hair; blood or sweat would work too. But there are a lot of conditions at play here—how was it stored, how much time since the material was taken from the person. Sakura, so you think...?"

"It's just a thought that crossed my mind. I don't have any real confidence in the idea. But when I started thinking about Sasuke's chakra being used without him knowing it, that's what popped into my head."

"Get ahold of Sasuke's hair or skin and then, from there, his chakra," Tsunade mused, staring out into space. "That's not a bad line of thought. Technically, it would be fairly difficult, but I feel like it's closer to the truth than anything else we've talked about."

"But assuming that someone is making Sasuke's chakra like that, how are they passing it on to the copy?"

"We'll have to think about that too. Did they do some kind of cosmetic surgery, or maybe give it to the fake in a capsule form, like a drug?"

There were too many threads to pull at here. But at least she had a starting point for her wandering thoughts now.

"Master, thank you so much. I'm going to think about this a bit more by myself," Sasuke thanked Tsunade.

"Good luck, Sakura." Tsunade nodded. "I'd see you through to the end of this discussion, but I am actually retired. I'll leave the rest to you lot."

"Please do that, Master." Sakura nodded firmly.

Because Sasuke would have told us to deal with it ourselves too...

∞

Tsunade said she would stay and drink a bit longer, so Sakura left her and headed out of the restaurant.

She figured she would try to find some books or documents that might serve

as a reference at Konoha Hospital and started to walk in that direction, when someone called her name from behind.

“Sakura!”

Turning around, she saw Sai walking toward her. “Sai.”

“On your way back from lunch?”

“Mm-hmm, with Master Tsunade. I was just thinking I’d go and look up some things at the hospital.”

“Oh yeah?” He fell in step alongside her, saying he had business at the Hokage’s Office.

“I heard, you know,” Sakura said, remembering what the Hokage had told her. “You’re looking into that thing where the daimyo was attacked, right?”

“Master Kakashi told you?” Sai asked.

“Yeah. I was in his office with Ino yesterday, and he told us.”

“He did? Well, I guess it’s only natural he’d tell you guys,” Sai said, almost muttering.

She started to ask if his investigation was getting anywhere and stopped herself. She felt like she shouldn’t really intrude on him too much. Sai probably gave encouragement or advice to himself when he needed it.

“By the way, did you hear about Sasuke?” Sai asked, dropping his voice.

Sasuke nodded yes. “But actually, Ino and I found out before you. When we were on that trip to Suna, Gaara told us about it.” Sakura told him about the trip.

“So even his chakra was the same as Sasuke’s?” Sai was surprised.

“Uh-huh. Gaara said it was in the Sasuke he saw.”

“The informant who told me about Sasuke didn’t mention the chakra part.” The look on Sai’s face was grim.

“But I thought of something when I was talking with Master Tsunade before. Chakra can be transferred. So maybe Sasuke’s chakra is being used for evil purposes right now without him knowing about it.”

“Without him knowing...”

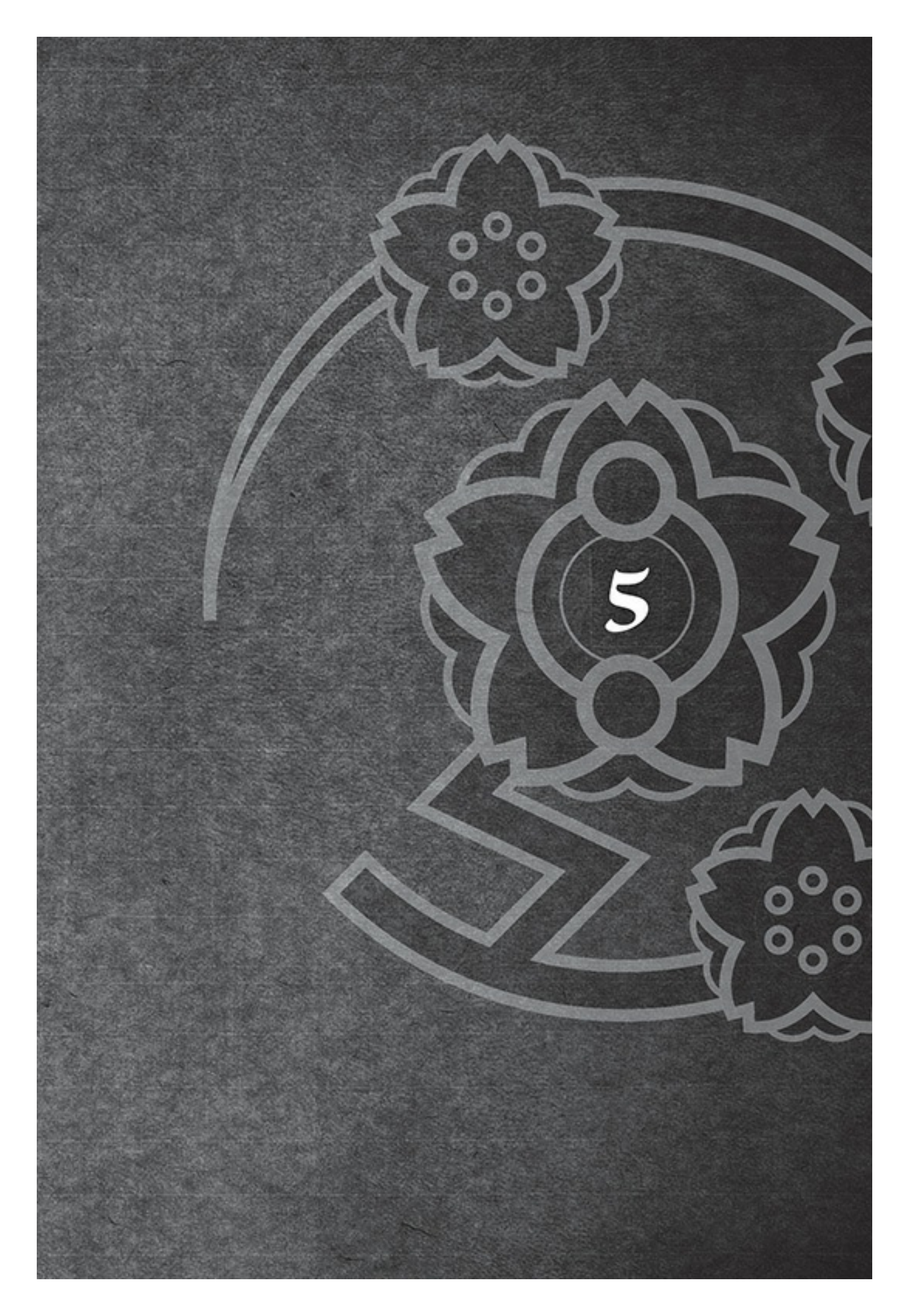
Sakura went on to tell Sai about the theory she had come up with while talking with Tsunade earlier.

“Hair or skin, huh?” Sai murmured, and abruptly stopped moving.

“What’s wrong?” Sakura looked back at him.

Face still grim, Sai brought a hand to his chin.

Just as Sakura was about to prompt him, Sai said, “Sakura, you mind coming to the Hokage’s office with me?”



5

Chapter 5

1

When Sakura went into the Hokage's office with Sai, Kakashi and Ino were waiting there. Ino looked exhausted somehow.

"Ino, you're here too?"

"Yeah, I had something I wanted to try, so I went to the communications office with Master Kakashi, but..."

"Communications?" Sakura looked doubtful.

"Well, Ino said she wanted to try and see if we could contact Sasuke directly from here with her Mind Transmission Jutsu," Kakashi replied, from behind his desk. "So we tried it, but..."

"Didn't work," Ino said, shrugging her shoulders. "Maybe we could have made it happen if we had a rough idea of where Sasuke is, but searching the whole world randomly definitely didn't work. I'm kinda beat." She stuck her tongue out. The Mind Transmission Jutsu used by the Yamanaka clan required a fair bit of concentration, which made it hard to use for extended periods of time.

"Anyway, what are you two doing here?" Kakashi asked.

"I wanted to talk to you," Sai replied.

"Oh?"

"It's about the fake Sasuke. It just might be that the Anbu is involved."

"What?" Kakashi's eyes grew narrow.

"Sakura told me," Sai continued. "The fake Sasuke people are seeing doesn't just look like Sasuke, he even has Sasuke's chakra, right?"

"According to Gaara."

"Sakura said chakra can be extracted from hair or skin. The chakra that the counterfeit Sasuke's cloaked in might have been created like that."

"Hair or skin," Kakashi murmured, thoughtfully. "That might indeed be the

missing piece.”

“No, it’s just a theory, okay?” Sakura panicked a little at Sai racing ahead of her. “If that’s how they did it, that still doesn’t explain how a copy of Sasuke is strolling around without Sasuke’s knowing it.”

“Well, a hypothesis is a hypothesis,” Kakashi noted. “So how does the Anbu figure into it?”

“My informant said something that’s been bugging me. He said that people from the Konoha Anbu were investigating the Final Valley, and the bridge where Sasuke and Master Danzo fought, right after the Great War.”

“The Anbu were?”

“Yes. He said that the Anbu were taking bits of dirt and stone from the place.”

“What would be the point of taking things like—oh!” Halfway through her sentence, Ino understood.

Sakura had a flash of insight at about the same time. “Right,” she half-said, half-murmured. “They wanted things from Sasuke.”

“Exactly.” Sai nodded slowly.

“It definitely would have been easy to find bits of Sasuke’s hair or skin in that place,” Kakashi said.

And his blood, Sakura added in her heart.

The Final Valley was where Sasuke and Naruto had fought so desperately to decide the last battle. They had each lost an arm in that fight. So there was no doubt that blood and tissue had been left behind there.

And the bridge where Sasuke fought Danzo—just as with the Final Valley, it would have been possible to find Sasuke’s hair or blood there. If it had been collected immediately after the Great Ninja War, there would have been a greater “freshness” to Sasuke’s tissue.

“However,” Kakashi noted. “I’m no specialist, but wouldn’t it take some serious work to separate out Sasuke’s hair or skin or whatever from the rubble they brought back, and then extract his chakra from it?”

“I think it would be an overwhelming amount of work,” Sakura said. But the Anbu had probably done that work.

She tried to remember the Final Valley then.

The fighting was over, and Naruto and Sasuke were lying on top of the massive fallen statue. Sakura treated both of their arms, while Kakashi watched over them, smiling. And then, they left the valley with a sense of hope for the new era.

The Anbu went down into that valley after Sakura and the others left. They scraped up dirt and picked up bits of rock. Looking for traces of Sasuke...

If that had actually happened, Sakura could only feel a sense of discomfort at how incomprehensible the work was.

“But what are the Anbu trying to accomplish by having a fake Sasuke seen all over the place?” Ino asked.

“I have no idea. But if this idea we’re talking about here is right and they did make a fake Sasuke, then...Master Kakashi.” Sai turned toward Kakashi. “This might explain the fact that the men who attacked me were cloaked in Tailed Beast chakra.”

“So you’re saying the Anbu are collecting tissue and the like from jinchuriki and getting the chakra of Tailed Beasts from that?”

“Don’t you think it’s a possibility? Both cases share the fact that the attackers were cloaked in another chakra.”

“That man who’s always with Kido, Magire—he’s a medical ninja. It’s not inconceivable for him to be researching this sort of technique on Kido’s orders.”

“W-wait a minute. Don’t leave us out of this,” Ino interjected.

Sakura was also confused. She couldn’t exactly see where they were going with this conversation. “Um, what are you talking about, ‘Tailed Beast chakra’?”

“Oh, I’m sorry. Hmm. How can I explain it?” Kakashi scratched his head before clapping his hands together. “Oh! Well, anyway, the three of you are on the same team now.”

“What?”

“Huh?”

While Sakura and Ino were baffled, Sai merely noted calmly, “It’s certainly very likely we’re chasing the same enemy. In which case, it might be better to share information and work as a team.”

“Enemy?” Sakura parroted.

“Tsumiki Kido from the Anbu,” Sai said. “And Magire. I’m targeting them now.”

In investigating the attacks on the daimyo and his advisor, Sai and Kakashi had landed on these two as likely suspects. There was a very real possibility that the attacks had been scripted and performed by the Anbu with the aim of obtaining a budget increase. While he was looking into this, Sai had been targeted for assassination. And the assassins had been cloaked in Tailed Beast chakra.

“Tailed Beast chakra,” Sakura murmured.

“So then,” Ino said. “Kido and his gang maybe collected Naruto’s tissue in the Final Valley too? And they extracted the chakra of Nine Tails from that...”

“But the chakra cloaking the men who attacked me only had one tail.”

“Maybe the number of tails doesn’t matter,” Sakura said. “I mean, when Naruto was getting his tails at first, he had a different number of them at the different stages of seal removal.”

“Oh, this is good. The way you’re talking like this. This team’s pretty impromptu, but it looks like it’s going to work out well,” Kakashi said, a casual remark that seemed out of place.

“Please don’t tease us, Master,” Ino said.

“Yes, don’t,” Sai chimed in. “However impromptu this team might be, Sakura and I were originally on the same team, and I’m completely comfortable having Ino join in. Right, Ino?”

At her name, Ino’s face turned red. “R-right! Easy win here!”

Knowing how Ino felt about Sai, Sakura giggled lightly.

“No, no, I’m sorry for teasing you. To be honest, I’d like to join you myself, get

out there and run around, but ever since this thing got plopped on my head, it's not so easy for me to just take off like that," Kakashi said, patting the Hokage hat. Then his face stiffened. "Of course we should be going after Kido and Magire as suspects, but I've generally allowed the Anbu to operate under their own judgment, so part of the responsibility for all this definitely lies with me. And for that, I have to apologize to you."

Sakura and the others stared at Kakashi as he continued. "I intend to immediately review the Anbu organization. All the energy I want to use out there with you, I'll use to rack my brain on that. So you three take care of Kido and Magire."

"We will," the younger ninja replied in unison.

∞

"So no Ino-Shika-Cho combo, but Ino-Saku-Sai instead, huh?" Ino said.

"Sounds pretty awful," Sakura retorted.

"Who cares if it sounds bad?" Ino threw back. "As long as our teamwork is good."

After leaving the Hokage's office, the three had decided to move to the roof of Konoha Hospital for the time being to discuss what to do going forward.

Sai nodded. "I'm going to keep watching over Kido."

"And us, what should we do? Maybe it'd be good if we checked into Sasuke's fake?" Ino said, looking at Sakura.

"Probably. But I also feel like we should get some more evidence on whether the Anbu were really collecting pieces of Sasuke. Right now, all we have to go on is what the informant told Sai."

"Oh yeah," Ino said. "But how are we supposed to do that?"

"I was thinking that if the Anbu were collecting Sasuke's hair and blood, there might be other places besides the Final Valley and that bridge."

"You mean that they would have been examining other places too?" Sai asked.

“Right. I don’t think the Final Valley or the bridge had such a huge amount of hair or blood for them to extract chakra from. So maybe they collected it from a bunch of places.”

“So, like, where?” Ino asked.

“If we expand our scope to outside the village, I don’t know either,” Sakura admitted. “But if we limit it to inside the village, then the first thing that pops into my mind is Sasuke’s house. And then Nakano Shrine. Places like that.”

“Hmm, those two places do have potential,” Sai remarked.

“And if they wanted even fresher hair from Sasuke, there’s probably a strong possibility that the Anbu went to the shrine over his house,” Sakura said.

“Mmm, but I wonder.” Ino crossed her arms and stared off into space. “Would they really go all the way over there to look for hair? I think it’s pretty likely that they managed to bring back blood from the Final Valley, but finding Sasuke’s hair at Nakano Shrine would be pretty tough.”

“They go and look for it, and if it’s not there, it’s not there. But I think they went to look at least once. Right after the Great War.” Sakura proposed that they ask around to find out if anyone had seen the Anbu in the vicinity of Nakano Shrine at that time. “If someone did, that’s circumstantial evidence at least.”

“Okay! So let’s do that.” With Ino’s agreement, the plan for all three was decided.

“We should meet regularly and share whatever we’ve learned,” Sai said. “If we collect every scrap of evidence, no matter how small, it’ll lead us to Kido eventually.”

Sakura and Ino nodded their agreement, and the hastily put-together team got to work.

Working was good. She felt much better working than sitting in her room moping. And she was working for Sasuke’s sake.

This thought was what kept Sakura going.

Kido was getting impatient.

He had succeeded in sending a Sasuke doppelgänger out into the world to be seen as much as possible. But the star of the show, Sasuke himself, had not appeared in the village.

Why is he not coming back?

There was no way the real Sasuke was unaware of the current situation. He had to have heard about it somewhere.

Kido did not like Sasuke's lack of response. It stank of the notion that Sasuke was taking no notice of what Kido was trying to do.

But in his impatience, Kido struck upon a single excellent idea. If he played this card, not only was there a fairly high probability that Sasuke would return, but the situation would become even more favorable in terms of Kido's plan.

"So play the next card," Kido said, in his office. Magire and several other high-level ninja were also there. All wore Anbu masks.

"This woman," he said, waving his hand lightly. A moment later, a single kunai plunged into the wall, coming to rest on a single photograph. "Take her. A classmate of Sasuke's, Haruno Sakura. Once news she is missing reaches Sasuke's ears, he will come back to the village."

"And then we'll take the next step and kill her?" another ninja said. "The impact on him would be greater that way."

"No, we won't kill her," Kido said. A thin smile spreading across his face, he continued. "Not right away."

3

At first, it was rough going for Sakura and Ino on their rounds of the village.

To begin with, Nakano Shrine was on the outskirts, in a place where there weren't too many houses. On top of that, the period immediately after the Great War itself was a stumbling block. It had already been more than two years since the end of the war. People's memories were fading.

It took three days of asking around near the shrine before they heard anything useful from anyone.

“The Anbu? Oh, I saw them!” the anyone in question—Rock Lee—told them. “There were about three of them, I guess!”

“When was that?” Sakura asked.

“It was a little over two years ago,” Lee replied. “I sometimes come to this area on my runs. That’s actually why I’m here today. After all, normally, there aren’t very many people around here, you see? Which is why I remember seeing the Anbu that day. Although, well, you’ll see the Anbu popping up anywhere, depending what sort of mission they’re on. I didn’t think it was particularly suspicious.”

Sakura and Ino glanced at each other and nodded.

“What are you investigating? If you’d like, I could be your superpower?!” Lee said, but Sakura and Ino gently dodged this.

“Mm-hmm, if something comes up, we’ll call you.” Like Naruto, Lee had a tendency to just charge in. Sakura thought he wasn’t particularly suited to the evidence-gathering sort of work she and Ino were doing.

In the evening, they met with Sai and reported the results of the day’s investigations. On her way home, Sakura’s feet were light. They had gotten results that day, however modest.

If they circled in on Kido bit by bit, they could help Sasuke. That thought renewed Sakura’s determination.

“I told you to let go!”

The sudden angry roar stopped her in her tracks. It had come from a side street near her house.

She peered into the alley. It was already night, but the street lamps penetrated the dark, however faintly, so the road ahead of her wasn’t pitch black.

Several men were pressing another man down onto the ground. The men doing the pressing all wore Anbu masks.

“Look! Let me go!”

“Quiet! You’re suspected of terrorism!”

“I’m telling you, it wasn’t me!”

Of the quarrelling voices, the one coming from the man on the ground was familiar to Sakura.

“Sasuke?!” she cried out.

“Sakura!” The man on the ground lifted his face.

It was indeed Sasuke.

“Tell them. I came back to the village and suddenly they attacked me. They’re saying I killed some terrorists or something.”

Please let him go. Sakura swallowed the words before they had a chance to leave her mouth.

“Wait. Are you really Sasuke?” she asked, in all seriousness. She’d been thinking and working all this time on the idea of the fake Sasuke. She was bound to become paranoid.

“And now *you’re* asking me stuff like that.” He let out a short sigh. “Did you forget your old classmate’s face? Look at me,” he said, briefly, and let the silence speak.

Reflexively, she returned his gaze, and in that moment, her vision blurred and smeared.

Genjutsu!

She couldn’t stay on her feet. But the genjutsu wasn’t that strong. She quickly quelled the disturbance in her chakra and regained her steady posture.

And then she felt a presence behind her.

Before she could turn around, she felt a stinging sensation on the back of her neck.

She felt some kind of drug being injected into her veins. The strength left her knees, and she collapsed facedown on the ground.

4

First came the pain in her neck. It was like her consciousness gradually returned through the doorway of that pain. Soon, she felt something cool and

hard against her shoulders and back. She realized she was lying on the floor in an unnatural posture. She tried to move her arms and legs, but couldn't.

She slowly opened her eyes. Her hands were bound behind her, her ankles tied together with some metal restraint.

She felt vaguely nauseous, but this passed after a while.

She was in a bare concrete room. Big, empty. Directly in front of her was a rusted iron door. There was no window, so she couldn't determine if she was underground or not.

She had no idea how much time had passed since she had been kidnapped.

She tried forcing her arms apart; maybe she could break the restraints. But she couldn't muster up much strength. They had injected something into her neck when they took her. This lack of strength was probably the effect of that.

The iron door had a tiny window in it, and she could see someone wearing an Anbu mask peeking in through it.

"She's awake. Tell Master Kido."

After these words, she heard the footsteps of someone else running off.

Master Kido, the mask said. So this was one of Kido's hideouts.

The memory of the kidnapping came back to her.

It had been cheap theater. The Anbu holding down the newly returned Sasuke. There was no way something like that would happen right next door to Sakura.

And she had been suspicious at first. But she let her guard down for an instant. And for shinobi, an instant was deadly.

I am such a disaster...

Sakura closed her eyes. She was ashamed of herself for getting caught in such an obvious trap.

She could hear the footsteps of several people, and then the door opened to allow a man with a hooked nose in. Beside him was a fair-skinned man with a monocle.

Hook Nose was wearing a coat over his uniform, while Monocle was in a white robe. Two masked Anbu members stood behind them, probably the pair who had been watching over Sakura outside the door.

“So you’re...Kido, then” Sakura said to Hook Nose, haltingly.

“I am. Haruno Sakura. You don’t happen to know where Uchiha Sasuke is?”

“Where...Sasuke is? I’d like to ask...you the same thing.” Her posture made it hard to speak. She was on her side like a caterpillar with her interlocutor looking down at her. The humiliation made Sakura’s eyes hard. “So you’re the one...who cobbled together the fake...Sasuke and sent him out, huh?”

“I am. I thought doing so might make him return to the village. But he has not. Which is why we kidnapped you.”

“To make...Sasuke come back..to the village...?”

You kidnapped me?

“You’re his classmate. Same team. Friends who fought together in the Great War, yes? Once he hears that you’ve gone missing, he will come back.”

“Hmm...I don’t know. Sasuke’s incredibly cool. Just me going missing. He won’t—”

Come back to the village, she tried to say, but a small pain shot through her heart.

Would you really not come back, Sasuke?

Because it was just me who went missing...

She wanted him to come back. But she quickly chased that thought away.

That can’t happen. If he comes back, he’ll be doing exactly what they want. He should definitely not come back.

But if he doesn’t come back, then that means that he’s not particularly worried about me...

Sakura was torn between her yearning for Sasuke and her fear for his safety.

“If he doesn’t come back,” Kido continued, “it’s quite simple. We’ll just kill you. When he hears your body’s been found, even that man will come home. At

least for the funeral.”

“In that case, go ahead and kill me now!” She figured she’d give herself over to her anger and try ripping off her shackles. But she still couldn’t muster enough strength.

“I think it would be best if you refrained from doing anything reckless,” Monocle said—most likely the medical ninja Magire. “The injection in your neck was a drug that makes it difficult to knead chakra while simultaneously numbing your muscles. Simply being quiet and resting will allow you to avoid expending excess energy. That is all.”

“Ngh!” Sakura gritted her teeth.

“We won’t kill you right now,” Kido said. “Ideally, we would be able to kill you in front of him.”

Sakura stared up at Kido. “In front of Sasuke?”

“Exactly. Doing so will improve the quality of his eyes.” Kido gave her the biggest smile he’d had since entering the room.

“The quality...of his eyes...?”

What is he talking about?

“The Uchihas are a deeply loving clan,” Kido remarked, malicious smile still playing on his lips. “I’m sure you also know that the nature of this love has granted the Uchihas strong eye powers, yes?”

She said nothing.

“Anyone would grieve and lament if a precious family member, a friend, a lover were to be killed before their eyes. But that’s not all that happens with the Uchiha clan. Their grief is so deep that it acts on their optic nerves and gives their eyes power.”

She managed to keep herself from gasping.

“Their sadness and anger and grief must further refine that eye power. Which is why we will kill you in front of him.”

Sakura took a deep breath. “And doing that, what are you trying to...?”

“A sharingan drug,” Kido told her. “We’re going to use his eyes as the ingredients and make a drug. A drug that will allow anyone to use the sharingan. We’ll sell it.” His throaty laugh crawled along the concrete floor. “I will collect more money than anyone has ever seen before. Money, money...!”

The menacing chuckle turned into loud laughter, and filled the room.

This man...

For the first time, Sakura felt not hatred for this man Kido, but fear.

5

There was a knock on the door.

Sai turned the shower off. In between knocks, he could hear a voice calling his name. It sounded like Ino. He put on some underwear and headed toward the door, drying his head with a towel.

When he opened the door, Ino was standing there.

“So, Sai, the thing is—whoa! Hey!” In an instant, Ino’s face was beet red. “Why aren’t you wearing any clothes?”

“Sorry, I was in the shower.” He had thought it would be fine to open the door to Ino like this, but apparently, it was not. The mysterious part was that not only did she get angry, her face also turned red.

“Anyway, what’s going on? It’s so early,” Sai said, and Ino turned her gaze back on him. Her face was still red, but her expression held a hint of tension.

“Sakura’s gone.”

“Sakura?” The hands moving the towel on his head stopped.

“I went to the therapy center early this morning since there’s some paperwork we have to do together. But she never showed. So I went to her house, and she’s not there. I tried detecting her chakra, but I couldn’t find any trace of it.”

Sai let out a sigh. “It’s probably Kido and his gang.”

“That’s what I thought too.”

“Let’s go look for her,” he said, and went into his room. As he hurriedly

yanked on his uniform, he called to Ino in the entryway. “If he wanted to get in the way of our investigation, all he’d have to do is take her down right then and there. The fact that she’s gone means they’ve taken her somewhere.”

When he was done getting ready, he went back out to Ino. “Have you told Master Kakashi?”

Ino shook her head. “Not yet.”

“Could you use Mind Transmission to tell him?” Sai asked.

Ino nodded and quickly wove the signs to use her jutsu. In a moment, Kakashi, Ino, and Sai were connected in their heads via the Mind Transmission Jutsu.

“Master, Sakura’s been kidnapped.” Ino explained the situation. *“Sai and I are going to go look for her now.”*

“You need backup?” Kakashi’s voice flowed through their heads. *“Having said that, though, a lot of people are out on missions. The number of people I can mobilize right away is limited.”*

“We’re fine just the two of us,” Sai said. *“I’m sure Sakura is still alive. But if we do a large-scale search, there’ll be a commotion in the village, and they might just kill her immediately.”*

“Okay, sorry, but I’m counting on you,” Kakashi said, apologetically. *“I’d like to go with you, but a message came in from the Raikage over the wireless earlier. He said we should probably go ahead and have a meeting of the five Kages about putting Sasuke on the wanted list already. I’m going to discuss the situation and get them to wait a bit.”*

“Master, please take care of that. We’ll handle—” Sai said, and Ino’s jutsu was released.

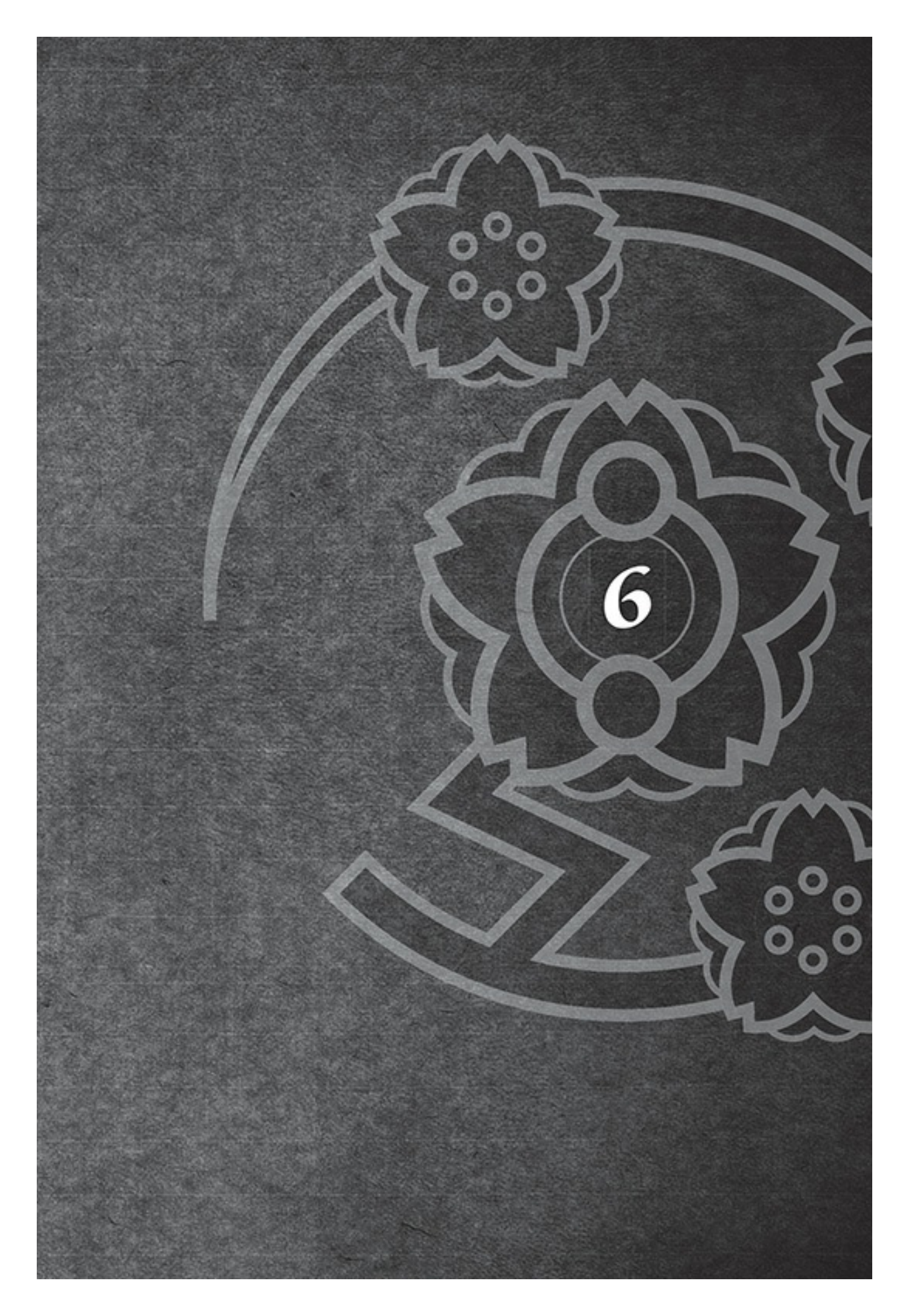
“But look for her where?” Ino said.

“I’ve been watching Kido for ten days or so now, I know a few of the places he goes around to. We’ll start there.”

“But they know that you’ve been investigating them, right? So they wouldn’t hold Sakura anywhere you might know about, would they?”

Sai nodded; Ino’s remark was exactly on point. “I’ve got an idea. It’s a bit of an

aggressive way of doing things, though. Let's go," he said, and started moving.



6

Chapter 6

1

A sharingan drug. They were going to make a drug from Sasuke's eyes.

Sakura's face twisted up hearing their disgusting plan. And she was furious that they had included her in it. But her fury didn't last long. It was quickly followed by a wave of self-hatred.

What am I doing?

Feelings of self-recrimination welled up from a seemingly bottomless fountain and robbed Sakura of her willpower. Just when she was finally feeling like she was doing something for Sasuke, this failure. So that now, instead of doing anything for him, she was a pawn in the scheme against him.

I'll see you soon, he had said.

She had been waiting for that "soon."

But now, because of her failure, Sasuke was being backed into a terrible corner. This was the worst. Seeing him again like this was the worst possible outcome.

Sai! Ino! she cried out in her heart. *Have you already realized that they've got me? Hurry and help—*

She gasped suddenly. She felt like she had managed to catch herself just on the verge of falling into a dark ravine.

What am I saying? Hurry and help me?

No, she avowed to herself firmly. *No, no, no.*

She remembered the time when she, Sasuke, and Naruto first came together on Team Seven. Remembered the self who was so weak then.

Naruto and Sasuke would protect me. I was always protected. And I hated myself for that. So I got stronger. I didn't want to always be looking at their backs. I wanted to be their equal. Which is why...

Me right now, she thought, *I'm just being the weak me from back then, aren't*

I? Feeling hopeless, waiting for friends to save me. I can't face Sasuke like this.

It started with "You're annoying" and got to "I'll see you soon. Thank you."

It's come this far, my relationship with Sasuke.

Sakura didn't want to go back to that old annoying self. She didn't want to go back to being weak.

Do it, do what you can right now...

"Sasuke—" Sakura said, looking up at Kido. "You really think Sasuke's going to be caught that easily by the likes of you?"

"I do," Kido said icily, the smile disappearing. His attitude, so filled with certainty, made Sakura shudder. "I wouldn't presume to try and lure him to the village when I had no chance of success. It's true that he is strong. I acknowledge that. However, we also have no little amount of skill."

The word "skill" made Sakura remember. The men who attacked Sai were cloaked in Tailed Beast chakra.

"So you're going to use the Tailed Beast chakra?" Sakura said.

"Did Sai tell you? Yes, exactly. Although strictly speaking, it's not Tailed Beast, it's pseudo-Tailed Beast. Even so, you can get a reasonable bit of fight from it."

"A reasonable bit of fight? You don't talk like you have a chance of beating him."

"It's sufficient. We don't have to defeat or kill him. All we need to do is restrain him and take his eyes."

The way Kido kept his cool made her angry. But this was a good turn of events. She couldn't let him stop talking to her.

"So you really want Sasuke's eyes that badly, huh?"

"We have made all these preparations to that end, after all."

"You collected Sasuke's hair and blood in the Final Valley, extracted his chakra, and created the fake. Isn't that right?"

"Just like a medical ninja to figure it out. Sharp insight. However, doesn't it all work out this way? You got to see Sasuke, even if he is a fake." Kido chuckled.

Sakura glared at him. “Why would I be glad to see a fake? And you all probably don’t know this, but the real Sasuke’s slimmer, his eyes are cooler, his voice is just a little bit lower, and the bridge of his nose is straighter. This fake you made is not the best quality. Definitely a quality issue.”

“Coming from you, that’s not very convincing, given that you were taken in by that very fake.”

“Shut up. I’m telling you it doesn’t look like him, it doesn’t—”

“This is the man who has been playing the part of Sasuke,” Kido said, interrupting her. One of the masked men behind him stepped forward. “He was acting as the Sasuke copy when we took you.”

“So? What’s your point?”

“Take off your mask,” Kido ordered, and the man did as he was told.

The mask was removed, revealing the face of a man who did not bear the slightest resemblance to Sasuke.

“And this,” Kido said, taking a white capsule from the pocket of his coat. “This is a capsule containing Sasuke’s chakra. If you take it, you will be cloaked in a chakra of the same color and lineage as Sasuke. Here.” Kido handed the capsule to the man who had removed his mask.

“Let her meet Sasuke,” Kido ordered him, watching Sakura out of the corner of his eye.

“Stop it.”

“Understood,” the man replied.

“I said, stop it!”

Heedless of Sakura’s cries, the man swallowed the capsule. He wove a sign with both hands.

Poof! A puff of smoke rose up, and when it cleared, Sasuke was standing there. Sasuke’s face. And the chakra was Sasuke’s as well.

“Ngh!”

Sakura quickly averted her eyes. She was ashamed of herself for the way her

heart pounded for a moment, albeit unconsciously.

“What do you think? Take another look and tell me about the poor quality.”

As if I'll look.

Sakura closed her eyes and turned her face away from Kido and the man. As if she would ever look.

Soon, she heard footsteps. They were coming toward her. Whoever it was stopped close to her.

She opened her eyes a crack and gasped. The fake Sasuke was crouching down and peering at her.

Get away from me!

Sakura tried to turn her face away again.

Then.

“I love you, Sakura,” said the fake Sasuke, stroking her hair.

“Ngh!” A chill so severe she wanted to cry out raced through her entire body, and she glared at the fake Sasuke.

His mouth stretched out into a thin, vulgar smile, the sort of expression that would never cross the face of the real Sasuke.

No words came out. Her entire being was filled with rage. Sakura glared very nearly hard enough to set the fake Sasuke on fire as he returned to Kido's side.

The fake Sasuke released the transformation and put his mask back on. Right up until the mask hid it, the man wore that same thin smile.

“Congratulations on being reunited,” Kido said. A certain satisfaction at having put Sakura in her place bled into the bottom of his voice.

Sakura let out her breath. She inhaled, exhaled again. She felt the violent storm in her heart recede bit by bit. Finally, she said, “Totally different.”

Kido looked puzzled.

“I was right. The real thing and the fake are totally different. But fine. Thanks to your creepy little show, I've stored up plenty inside me. Anger...and chakra,”

Sakura said, and sent all the chakra she had been secretly kneading while talking with Kido racing to all points in her body.

Because of the effect of the drug, she had needed time to knead her chakra, something she could normally do in a short time—which was why she had been trying to drag out the conversation. She kept challenging Kido to make him keep talking.

Having finished the One Hundred Healings jutsu, Sakura had no trouble building up chakra while talking, and keeping her opponent from realizing it to boot.

She had built up a nice stock of chakra. Spiced with her rage at being forced to witness that tasteless display, an unparalleled superhuman strength surged through Sakura's limbs.

“Magire, get another inject—”

“Too late!”

Sakura put all her strength into her arms and legs, and the cuffs around wrists and ankles went flying.

2

Together with Sai, Ino went out to where scrap materials were stored on the outskirts of town. They hid behind a metal drum and began their watch over the two-story wooden building diagonally across the road from them.

“That's one of the Kido faction safe houses,” Sai told her. “I think they use it for secret talks or hiding people or locking people up.”

Sai had noted that during the course of his observation of Kido, the man had come to this safe house several times. The building itself was encircled by hedges, with one person near the gate wearing the mask and coat of the Anbu keeping watch over the surroundings.

“Ino, check and see if you can sense Sakura's chakra in there.”

“Got it.” Ino went into detection mode. She could sense the chakra of three people inside. But none of them were Sakura's. “She's not there. Sakura's chakra isn't there.”

“It’s not?” Sai was disappointed.

“Hey, are we going to go check out all the places Kido goes to one by one like this?” Ino asked, curious.

“As if.” Sai shook his head. “That would take way too long. And if Kido has safe houses I don’t know about, it’d be game over.”

“So then what are we going to do?”

Before coming here, Sai had said they would use a bit of an “aggressive way” of doing things.

He pointed at the gate guard. “Fortunately, there’s only one person on watch. We’re taking him down.”

“Take him down? You mean, a battle? Now?”

“We’ll do it with a fast attack. Use your Mind Transmission and get inside him. And then all you have to do is get out right before my attack lands.”

It was a basic combo attack, one Ino-Shika-Cho often did. She had never done it with Sai before, but there was only one enemy and she had faith in Sai’s skill.

“Got it,” she replied, without hesitating. She wove the signs and focused her mental energy. “Okay, here I go.” She had no sooner spoken the words to Sai than she was flying out from behind the drum. At the same time, she sent her mental energy shooting out toward the shinobi at the gate.

Mind Transmission Jutsu!

Her jutsu a success, Ino made the guard stand stock-still.

Sai closed in on the guard, hands clenched into fists, and launched a single blow. Immediately before it landed, Ino shouted “Release!” and escaped from the guard’s mind.

Once again in control of himself, the first thing the guard saw was Sai charging toward him.

Sai’s fist landed in the other man’s side, and the guard doubled up. Sai then dropped a sharp strike onto the back of his exposed neck with a stiff hand.

The guard hit the ground without a cry. Sai tossed him over his shoulder

before quickly returning to where Ino stood.

“Let’s ask this guy. Everything,” Sai said, and started walking, still carrying the guard.

Once they were inside the scrap material shed, Sai rolled the guard onto the ground. All around them were heaps of scrap materials, a piece of which made for a very nice blindfold.

Sai took out some rope and tied the guard’s hands behind his back before lashing his ankles together. He then sat the still-unconscious guard up and leaned him against a pile of materials before waking him up.

“Sai! You—!”

“Quiet,” Sai said, his voice calm, and took the guard’s mask off.

The man was around thirty years old. He glared at Sai and Ino in turn with angry eyes.

“I didn’t want to have to do something so rough as this to a senior ninja, but we don’t have time to fool around. You’ll answer our questions for us.”

The man stayed silent and shifted his eyes away from Sai.

“You kidnapped someone yesterday, yes?” Sai said. “Where are you hiding her?”

Face still turned away, the man kept his mouth firmly clamped shut.

“I know that you’re a member of Tsumiki Kido’s faction. Where have you stashed Haruno Sakura?”

The man remained silent. He apparently intended to stay that way.

“If you continue to say nothing, we will use methods that I would really rather not.”

“Torture?” the man asked. His mouth twisted up into a challenging sneer.

Sai nodded easily. “Yes. I’m also a former Anbu member, after all. I know any number of ways to get a person to talk.”

“That’s fine then, isn’t it?” the man said. “I’m also Anbu. I know ways of enduring torture.”

“Do you think those will be useful?” Sai asked, pulling out a kunai. Then, without hesitation, he sliced the man’s clothes open, leaving him essentially naked from the waist up. But this man was not the sort to lose his composure at something like that.

Ino started to get nervous. She had been witness to interrogations on missions. At these, she had heard angry roars and threats any number of times, but none of them had ever turned to torture.

She braced herself for whatever bloody scene she was about to face.

Sai readied the brush he used for his Art of Cartoon Beast Mimicry. “Ino, you’d better not watch this.”

What was he going to do? What was he going to draw? Would he make a tiger attack? Or maybe an enormous snake would squeeze the man’s body? Or maybe...

One gruesome image after another flashed through her mind, and without thinking, she said, “Hey, Sai, don’t do anything—”

Too awful, she went to finish, but Sai was already moving his brush.

Coooochy coo, coochy coochy coo...

“Pftah! Ha ha ha!” The man began laughing out loud.

“That’s your torture?!” Ino yelped.

“When you don’t have any time, this works best,” Sai said, with a straight face.

“Really?”

“Yeah. I read it in a book.” During this entire exchange, Sai continued to tickle the man with his brush.

The man twisted his body as he laughed, wriggling and writhing, until finally saliva started to dribble out of the corners of his mouth.

After what Sai deemed sufficient time, he stopped moving his hand and asked, “Now will you tell us?”

“...Yes.” The man’s face and voice were despondent; no hint of the fearsome

Anbu remained in him.

∞

On the northeastern edge of the village, there was a brick storehouse, the Anbu man told them. Sakura should be there.

Sai quickly drew a bird with his Art of Cartoon Beast Mimicry, and he and Ino jumped on and headed for the storehouse.

It wasn't the first time she had ridden on one of Sai's birds, but it had been a while, so Ino started to lose her balance at one point.

"If you're scared, hang on to me," Sai said, still facing forward.

Ino felt a sweet sensation burst into bloom in her heart, but she quickly shook it off. "I'm okay."

The bird was moving fairly quickly. The streets of the town below turned into the green of forests and fields before her eyes. They passed wild black kites and hawks.

"I see it!" Sai shouted, pointing at their two o'clock.

On the other side of a grove of trees was a parcel of open land with a brick building in one corner. The bird steadily approached it.

Just as the bird began to slow down, several people in Anbu masks came flying out of the storehouse.

They had probably cloaked the area in a field invisible to the naked eye to let them know of intruders. And the bird had tripped it.

The Anbu who came out of the storehouse let their kunai fly all at once. Sai deftly steered the bird to avoid the countless blades shooting up at them.

The bird made a large circle in the sky before approaching the storehouse once more.

"Sakuraaaaa!" Ino yelled. "We're here to save you!"

In that moment, something suddenly broke through the roof of the storehouse and came shooting out into the sky above.

A human figure with fist thrust into the air—what came shooting out was

Sakura, her entire body colored with chakra.

“Sakura?” Ino cried out wildly from the back of the bird.

Sai blinked hard. “Weird. We’re *supposed* to be here to save *her*.”

3

“Too late!”

As she cried out, Sakura clenched her hands into fists and looked up at the ceiling. She dropped her hips, stiffened her knees, and—*I’m smashing through and getting out!*

She didn’t care whether this room was underground or however many floors aboveground. She was going up and out. That was her sole thought.

“Hold her down!” Kido roared, but Sakura moved faster.

Cherry Blossom Crash!

“Oh yeeeeah!!”

Sakura leapt toward the ceiling. Her right fist, glittering with chakra, pulverized the concrete ceiling. Beyond the ceiling, there was simply a space like an enormous storehouse.

So I was locked up underground.

Her recognition of this was fleeting. The force of the Cherry Blossom Crash still with her, Sakura smashed through the ceiling of the storehouse as well.

Abruptly the sky opened up before her eyes, and a sense of liberation filled her heart. And then she heard, “Sakura?!”

Turning her gaze to the right, she saw Sai’s bird. On its back were Sai and Ino.

Sakura killed her upward momentum, landing right next to the storehouse before leaping off to put some distance between herself and the building.

Sai and Ino slid off the bird and hit the ground very close to Sakura.

“Are you okay?” Ino asked.

“Yeah, basically. But how did you guys know I was here?”

“We strung up one of Kido’s subordinates. Although seeing how things have turned out, I guess you were okay by yourself.” Sai grinned wryly.

“No way,” Sakura replied with a severe look. “I’m glad you’re here. Kido and Magire are in there. Don’t let your guard down.”

Kido and Magire then came flying out of the hole Sakura had torn in the roof. They were followed by several members of the Anbu.

Sakura and her friends stood and glared at the ten or so members of Kido’s faction.

“A woman of superhuman strength, just as word had it,” Kido said, as if to provoke her. “But I’m not letting you get away. You really must stay and refine those eyes of Sasuke’s for us.”

“As if I’d do a thing like that!”

“Sakura, what’s he talking about?” Ino asked. “Refining Sasuke’s eyes?”

“These guys are planning to take Sasuke’s eyes and make a drug out of them.”

“A drug?”

“A sharingan drug. They say it’ll give anyone who takes it the power to use sharingan. They think that if they kill me in front of Sasuke, it’ll be too much of a shock for him, and that shock will increase the powers of his eyes.”

Ino was speechless.

Sakura continued. “They made the fake Sasuke with a drug too. They give this capsule with Sasuke’s chakra to someone who uses transformation jutsu to look like Sasuke.”

“Since you’re here, why don’t the two of you die in front of Sasuke as well?” Kido said, with a broad grin.

“Three of his friends die at once before his eyes.” Magire picked up where his leader left off. “We can expect an equivalent increase in his visual power. That is all.”

“You wouldn’t!” Ino narrowed her eyes.

“A drug, huh?” Sai’s voice was cool. “So the Tailed Beast chakra that the guys

who attacked me were cloaked in. That's the effect of a drug too?"

"It is," Kido said. "A Tailed Beast drug."

"So in the Final Valley, you didn't just collect Sasuke's hair and blood," Sakura said. "You also got Naruto's and extracted his chakra?"

"You're half-correct. The remaining half...let's just say that's a trade secret." Kido's grin grew broader.

"What do you mean, trade secret? Talking like you're a company!" Ino laughed.

"We are," was Kido's immediate response.

"What?"

"I'm leaving the village and starting a military company. Of global scale."

"A military...company?" Sakura's face was skeptical.

"Oh, is that it?" Sai said. "You're going to sell the drugs in conflict regions?"

"That is precisely it," Kido replied. "Take this drug and be cloaked in Tailed Beast chakra. Take this one and use the sharingan. If such drugs exist, organizations wishing to increase their fighting power will most certainly desire them. And that's not all. I can even manufacture the conflicts themselves. This time, I made a fake Sasuke, but theoretically I could make a copy of a key person in a certain country and have the fake take actions to instigate a conflict. The result being that we could sell our drugs in the region once the conflict breaks out. Or there's the route of selling mercenaries enhanced with drugs. At any rate, massive profits will come rolling in. And I will obtain money, enough money to burn, should I so wish." As Kido spoke, an almost ecstatic expression rose up onto his face.

"The drugs are a sham. I don't believe everyone is just going to line up for something like that," Ino said.

Kido shook his head, chastising. "I'd appreciate it if you'd refer to them as a rational choice, rather than a sham. And there absolutely are people who want them. They'll be able to use the powerful chakra of the Tailed Beasts and the sharingan, after all."

“You’re deluded if you think a drug can make you stronger,” Sakura said. “People get stronger by making it through tough times. They move up one step at a time, aiming for the sky.”

“That is truly infantile thinking,” Kido snorted. “The humble opinion that time simply makes good. You made this children’s therapy center or whatever it’s called, hmm? If I had to say, that sort of thing is the very soul of inefficient and uneconomical. Care for the minds of children? The only thing spending time and money on that is going to do is produce more weak children. Children whose spirits can be broken are simply weak in the end.” He spat this last part out.

“Excuse me?! Sakura and I—” Ino started, but Sakura cut her off.

“It’s okay, Ino. Let him talk. This guy could never understand the human heart. He doesn’t understand, and that’s why he failed at luring Sasuke out, right?” Sakura said, and laughed boldly. “He set a fake to work, and Sasuke still didn’t come back to the village. He totally misread Sasuke.”

A flash of annoyance raced across Kido’s face. “He will come back. If we use you three as bait, that is. You there!” Kido called to his masked subordinates on standby behind him. “Take the Tailed Beast drug. And then secure them. If you have to use force and you end up killing them, that’s fine as well.”

At Kido’s order, the subordinates began to move all at once. They removed their Anbu coats and tossed them aside before taking off their masks. Once they were in just their uniforms for easier movement, they brought capsules to their mouths.

“Now you can get a taste of the immensity of this ‘sham’ power, as you call it,” Kido said.

Sakura and her companions spread out, leaving a good distance between them so they could spring into action.

And then, one after another, the chakra of Kido’s subordinates grew until all were cloaked in a pale purple chakra with tails growing out of it. The number of tails varied. Some of the ninja only had one, others had two. The lengths of the tails also differed from person to person.

“They have different numbers of tails,” Ino noted.

“Two seems like it’d be stronger than one, going from the strength of the chakra,” Sakura replied, sizing up their enemy.

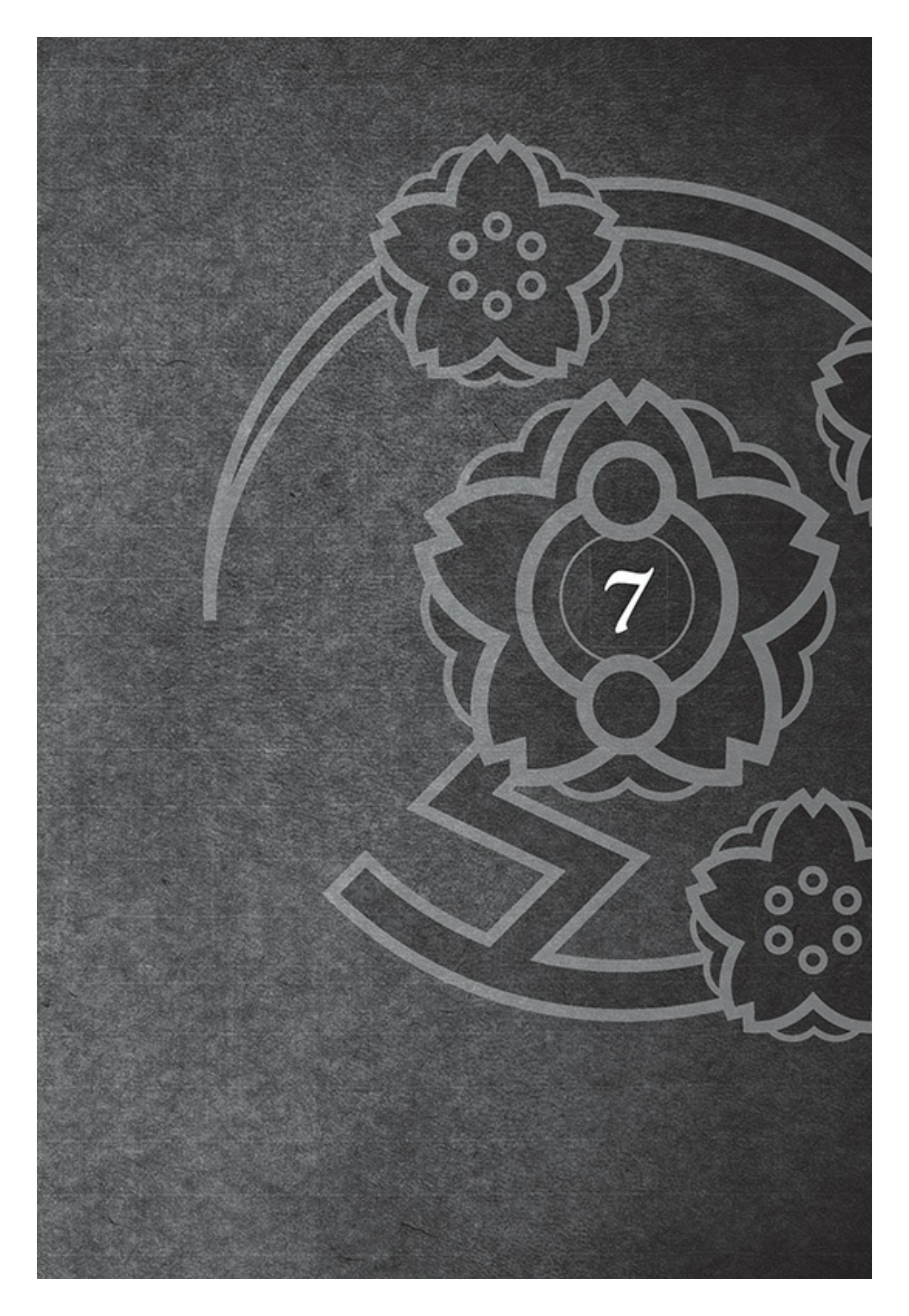
“The number of tails is proportional to the amount of chakra the person has,” Kido remarked, lightly. “If you’re interested, perhaps you’d care to try the drug?”

“Careful,” Sai said. “Even the ones with a single tail are fairly strong.”

“Got it.” Sakura nodded.

Kido thrust his chin out. “Get them.”

Enemies cloaked in Tailed Beast chakra charged them.



7

Chapter 7

1

Ten enemies raced toward them. Kido and Magire retreated to the rear.

The team of Sakura, Ino, and Sai facing this onslaught might have been hastily thrown together, but that didn't mean they were out of sync with each other.

When faced with a superior number of enemies, the key was to always keep moving and watch the backs of your allies—the body reacting without the head thinking.

Their enemies attacked in a variety of ways. Some tried to push them back with force, others released kunai and shuriken colored with chakra. There was even a Wind Style user. Occasionally, a slicing wind—which required real attention—came flying at them. And it seemed that the deadliness of each and every one of these attacks was further increased by the chakra of the Tailed Beasts.

Sakura fought with taijutsu and strikes. There were no long-distance-type enemies, so she was never at a loss for how to move forward. In this sort of close-range fight, Ino often moved around to the rear, but she wouldn't be able to get away with that now. Instead, she backed Sai up with taijutsu.

A fireball abruptly came flying at them. And then several fireballs, all about the size of a human head, from their right.

Sakura leapt out of the way.

Their Fire Style attacker was the man who had played the fake Sasuke in the basement. Two tails grew from his chakra cloak.

"You want me to be Sasuke for you again?" he said, smiling crudely.

"Go ahead and try it," Sakura said. "I'd probably throw my arms around your neck in delight. Of course, then I'd choke you."

"I'll be the one doing the choking!" Her opponent stretched a chakra tail out toward her. Just as it was about to reach Sakura's body, the tip transformed into something like a hand and grabbed ahold of her neck.

“Ngh!”

Her body was abruptly yanked upward, leaving her toes to dangle above the ground. She couldn't breathe.

“Tailed Beast chakra's pretty handy, you know.” Her opponent crossed his arms, and an easy grin slid across his face as his other tail shot forth.

The heavy blow hit her stomach. She was pummeled with a series of tail strikes. The damage wasn't serious, although she felt pain in the moment. But her position was not good. If she kept hanging there to be his punching bag, at some point he was going to get a decisive blow in.

Sakura gathered her chakra in both hands—in particular, her fingertips—and reached out for the tail around her neck. “Hng!” With a stifled cry, she tore the restraining limb away and dropped to the ground.

“Dammit!” Her opponent launched a follow-up attack with the tail.

Sakura dropped down out of its path and leapt at her opponent. She delivered a blow with her knee before tossing in an uppercut. Both landed nicely enough.

“Never! Change! Into! Sasuke! Again!” She punctuated each word with a punch. “Understand?!”

Her big finish was a roundhouse kick. Her opponent's eyes rolled back to reveal the whites and he fell without a sound.

Once she had defeated him, the chakra cloak disappeared from his body. It seemed that once the user lost consciousness, the chakra robe also disappeared. Which was no different from the structure of any other ninjutsu.

“Looks like the chakra vanishes if you knock them out!” she announced to Ino and Sai.

“And it only works for so long anyway!” came Ino's voice in return.

Sakura had also confirmed that with her own eyes.

Several light purple chakra robes had already disappeared, even though the wearers were not unconscious. But those wearers quickly popped another capsule into their mouths to bring back the Tailed Beast chakra.

“If we just fight slow and steady like this, they’ll keep replenishing their chakra,” Sai noted. He was fighting with taijutsu, while he sent his ink tigers out on the offensive. “Let’s knock them all out.”

At that moment, Ino cried out and tumbled to the ground. An enemy had swept her feet out from under her with his tail. Two others came flying in at her with kunai.

“Ino!”

Sakura knocked one of the attackers backward with a fist, while the other took a flying kick from Sai and hit the ground.

Ino stood up.

“You okay?” Sai asked.

Ino nodded. “Yeah.” Then she saw that Sai had hurt his arm, and she covered the area with her hand without saying anything. She was blocking the opening of the wound with medical ninjutsu.

Sakura clenched her hand into a tight fist.

Ino-Saku-Sai. We fight pretty good! she murmured to herself, before dashing off toward the enemy.

2

Members of the Anbu lay in heaps around them, unconscious, chakra cloaks gone. And yet, even though all of their subordinates had been defeated, neither Kido nor Magire showed the slightest sign of wavering.

“If we’re going to fight those two,” Sakura said, staring at the two men on the other side of the fallen Anbu, “I’ll take Kido and lure him into the woods over there. Ino and Sai, you take care of that Magire guy.”

“Don’t do anything reckless, Sakura. The three of us together—” Ino started, but Sakura shook her head.

“We don’t know what kind of tricks he has up his sleeve. But at the very least, Magire is a medical ninja, so he should have some kind of recovery jutsu. I think it makes more sense to get him away from Kido and out of his healer role.”

“In that case, I’ll take Kido,” Sai said, but Sakura shook her head at this too.

“Then we’d have two medical ninja here. It’s better if we don’t clump together, if we split up,” Sakura said, nodding to herself. “I can heal my own wounds, and Sai, you can get Ino to heal yours.”

Sai dipped his head slightly in agreement. “Got it. We’ll do it like you say, Sakura.”

Just as their brief meeting ended, Kido and Magire began to move.

Abruptly disappearing, they landed next to Sakura and her friends in the next instant.

“I know you must be tired, so I do apologize, but we’ll have you go up against us next,” Kido remarked.

“You know, if you’re disappointed at how weak your subordinates are, you could let it show in your face a little,” Sakura said.

Kido’s mouth twisted up slightly. “Although I have no real issue with provoking or being provoked in this manner, for now, let’s prioritize time.” He took his coat off to reveal a well-built body under his uniform.

He’s strong, Sakura thought.

Naturally, if he was going to rise to the upper ranks of the Anbu, this man—who spoke of nothing but money and profits—had to be strong first and foremost. His appearance made that strength quite obvious.

Magire, on the other hand, did not remove his white robe. He apparently intended to fight as he was.

Lightning Style! Thunder!

Immediately, Kido waved his arms and released countless tiny bolts of lightning.

Sakura and the others spread out to avoid them. Taking a hit from one bolt, Sai’s tiger splashed back into ink.

The moment Sakura landed, she started racing toward the forest that spread out to her right. The scenario where Kido did not take the bait did cross her

mind, but if he had kidnapped Sakura in order to “refine” Sasuke’s eyes, then he likely wouldn’t let her out of his sight that easily.

And in the end, he did chase after her.

“So you intend to separate Magire and I? I suppose it would be nice if that went well, hmm?”

Sakura ignored him and ran ever faster.

Entering the forest of enormous trees, she raced up the trunk of one of these and leapt from branch to branch. Kido trailed after her, looking like he was simply trying to keep up rather than overtake her.

Seeing her moment, Sakura stopped on a branch.

She faced Kido.

Their eyes met.

A wind tore through the forest, making Sakura’s hair dance around her head.

“Well, then,” Kido said. “Shall we get started?”

Without responding, Sakura hit the palm of her left hand with the fist of her right. *Whap!* The sound echoed through the forest, the signal for the start of the fight.

Kido kicked at a branch and closed the distance between them. They came together, launching kicks and punches, before pulling apart momentarily.

Kido waved his arms. *Lightning Style! Thunder!*

Once again, the bolts of lightning he had showed off earlier came shooting toward her.

Dodging, Sakura bounded from branch to branch and pressed in on Kido.

Cherry Blossom Crash!

Her fist thrust out before her connected directly with her enemy’s chest.

Yes!

“Hrngh!” Kido let out a cry of pain, and then disappeared in a burst of crackling electricity.

Tch! Sakura clucked her mental tongue. He had used Lightning Style Shadow Clones.

The original Kido was behind Sakura, to her left. He wove signs, moving both hands as if drawing a circle in the air. “Take this!”

Lightning Style! Bear Trap!

An enormous circle of lightning in the shape of a bear trap, the sort they’d use to catch animals in the mountains, came whizzing through the air, ready to close tightly around her.

She wasn’t going to be able to dodge it.

Building up a thick concentration of chakra in the palms of her hands, she caught hold of the electric blades snapping in on her from both sides, an enormous mouth closing. She stopped their inward momentum for a moment, but the blades stubbornly continued to press down toward her.

“Haah!”

But Sakura was the winner of that contest. With a battle cry, she focused her strength and repelled the trap; it vanished.

“Ho!” She could see Kido laughing. “You repelled the bear trap, hmm? In that case...” He took a light purple capsule out of his pocket—Tailed Beast chakra.

Sakura gasped.

Still under her watchful gaze, Kido placed the capsule on his tongue.

3

Magire’s expression did not change in the slightest after Kido disappeared into the forest at Sakura’s invitation.

“I have to ask at least,” Sai said. “If you’re interested in surrendering, we won’t attack.”

Magire adjusted the positioning of his monocle and cocked his head slightly to one side. “I do not understand the meaning of what you say. I have no intention of surrendering, nor do I have any need to. I will defeat you both and go to join forces with Master Kido. Or perhaps before that, Master Kido will secure that

woman and return here. Either way, you will be defeated here. That is all.” He moved both hands behind his back.

When they appeared again, each held several kunai.

“What’s with the kunai?” Ino’s face was doubtful.

Sai had never seen any like them either. The part of the blade that was normally iron was instead a glass container that tapered at the tip. Inside, some kind of colored liquid splashed about. He didn’t have to test it to know it was probably poison.

Magire launched the kunai.

Sai and Ino split, leaping off to the left and right. The glass kunai all missed them, but Magire quickly reached around behind him and pulled out several more. He likely had any number of these hidden weapons tucked away on his body.

Sai and Ino kept moving to keep from being easy targets, but Magire also kept moving, tossing the kunai from a variety of angles. Sometimes, he deliberately aimed above their heads, trying to use the travel time to get a hit.

Ino fell into a somersault and wove signs as she got back to her feet.

I’m going to try going in, she signaled Sai with her eyes. She was going to attempt Mind Transmission.

While Ino was readying her jutsu, Sai moved around to draw Magire’s eyes away.

But the jutsu failed. Apparently repelled by Magire, Ino scowled and quickly released her signs.

Sai spread out his scroll and let his brush race across it.

Art of Cartoon Beast Mimicry! Fujin! Raijin!

Two massive images, nearly twenty meters tall, stood up. The long shadows they cast plunged the area into darkness.

“You’re already bringing them out?!” Ino cried, running over to Sai’s side.

“This isn’t the time to be stingy,” Sai said. “We have to finish this quickly and

get to Sakura.”

Fujin raised its arm and brought an enormous fist down toward Magire.

Magire leapt backward to dodge the blow heading straight for him. But Raijin was there at the ready, and its foot came down on Magire’s head. The earth rumbled, and clouds of dust rose up.

There’s no way he could have dodged that, Sai thought.

The dust settled soon enough, and Raijin slowly lifted its foot. Or rather, Raijin wasn’t lifting its foot—it was being pushed up from below.

“What the....” Ino’s voice slipped out.

Holding Raijin’s foot up by one hand was Magire. He had apparently taken the Tailed Beast drug; he was cloaked in a light purple chakra.

With a flick of Magire’s wrist, Raijin lost its balance and toppled over. Sai and Ino flew backward, just barely managing to avoid being crushed in clouds of dirt and debris as the ground rumbled heavily beneath them.

Magire jumped up onto the chest of the fallen Raijin. There, for the first time, they got a good look at him.

At some point he had lost the monocle, and he had also tossed away the white robe. His hair stood on end. His intellectual appearance was now something fiendish. And the tails—he had six of them. All thick, all a meter or longer.

Magire raised those six tails and thrust them into Raijin’s chest.

A second later, Raijin’s body exploded and turned into a spray of black ink.

“For me as well,” Magire said, dropping back down to the ground. “This is not the time to withhold anything. That is all.” He sent several of the sharply tapered tails snaking out.

His target was Ino. She jumped in response, but the tails changed trajectory midway to chase after her.

Just as one looked about to reach her, Fujin stepped in and acted as her shield.

The tail pierced Fujin's foot, and the giant turned to ink, almost bouncing back from the tail.

Just like Raijin before, rather than the enormous painted warrior turning back to ink because it had been stabbed, it seemed like the tail had injected something, some kind of explosive chakra, causing the giant to explode.

The six tails sallied forth, still targeting the two young ninja.

As if the tails weren't enough, Magire still hurled poison-filled kunai from time to time. It was all Sai and Ino could do to keep avoiding the onslaught of attacks; they had no chance to launch their own offensive.

Sai seized hold of the merest breathing space between kunai and tails and tossed a single kunai of his own with everything he had. But Magire deftly evaded the blade headed for his collarbone.

"Sai!"

Suddenly, Ino had her arms around him, and they were tumbling to the ground together.

And then a tail shot up with incredible force from the place where Sai had been standing. Ino had detected it burrowing along to Sai underground.

"Sorry," Sai said.

Ino shook her head as if to say not to worry about it.

"This is bad, huh? We don't do something, it's going to keep getting worse too," Sai said, as Magire turned the tips of his tails toward them. Balls of light shot out at them.

They each dove to one side, and the balls slammed into the ground and exploded.

They didn't flow from the tails or come forth in some kind of organic way. It was more like the tails were shooting the balls like bullets.

So bring a bird out and attack from above? Sai glanced thoughtfully up at the sky.

"Sai." Ino reached out to him with her Mind Transmission. *"There's a strategy*

I want to try."

"Strategy?"

"I don't know how well it'll work, and there's a part that kind of seems suicidal, but..."

They continued to speak as they dodged Magire's attacks.

"...Got it. Let's try it." Sai nodded once Ino was finished explaining.

They exchanged a look and leapt into action simultaneously, throwing smoke bombs down onto the ground. A thick curtain of smoke rose up to hide them.

"This is a waste of your time!" Magire shouted. "That is all!" He brandished his six tails and whipped them at the smoke. The curtain dissipated, and the blindfold effect was gone.

Before the smoke was entirely cleared away, three ink tigers came forward to attack Magire head-on.

The enemy ninja shot balls of light from his tails to rain down on the tigers, and they quickly returned to ink. But from behind the ink, Ino appeared, kunai in hand.

The tigers were pawns. The real thing was Ino's kunai attack. An attack with one of Magire's own poison kunai.

But Magire didn't flinch. He waved a tail, and it hit Ino hard in the stomach.

"Ngh!" She went flying and slammed into the ground.

And then she stopped moving.

"Ino!" Sai shouted, leaping at Magire. He closed in on his enemy, kunai backward in his hand. Magire tried to defend with a tail, but in that instant, the Sai leaping at him turned to ink. An ink clone.

"Hrk!" The ink splattered onto Magire's face.

The real Sai threw himself at the momentarily off-guard Magire. He tried to bring the kunai in his hand toward the man's chest, but Magire's tails waved from side to side, providing a screen.

Sai leapt backward, and was trying to get closer again when the six tails shot

countless balls of light directly at him.

He couldn't completely evade the shower of bullets. He took several in one side, and a painful warmth bloomed and spread from the site of the injury. Sai dropped to his knees.

"Although I praise the courage required to launch waves of attacks mentally prepared for death," Magire announced, expressionless, "it was simply too ill-advised. That is all."

"Oh, I'm just happy to get your praise." The words were no sooner out of his mouth than Sai was kicking at the ground and charging toward his enemy.

Magire welcomed him with direct attacks and light balls.

Enduring the pain, Sai dodged them all.

"You truly are persistent. That is all." Magire split his six tails into groups of three. The tips of these transformed into something like hands and grabbed on to Sai from both sides.

His reaction time slowed because of the wound in his side, Sai was held fast by those six tails. He twisted and writhed, but he couldn't move an inch.

"That really...is all," Magire said, and one tail let go of Sai, the tip sliding up to rest in front of Sai's eyes.

In that tip sat the tiny glow, a warning of the ball of light to come.

At that moment, Sai saw a single falcon fly in behind Magire.

The falcon had a kunai in its talons. One of Magire's poison kunai.

Magire noticed the bird's approach and looked back over his shoulder.

Immediately before the falcon crashed into Magire's back, it changed course. It shifted back up to the sky, almost scraping along the man, and the kunai was gone.

Plunged into Magire's back.

"Release!"

Ino returned from the falcon to her own body. She quickly leapt up from where she had fallen facedown and raced over to Sai.

“You...!” For the first time, Magire showed signs of being shaken.

“We made it look like waves of attacks mentally prepared for death, but it was a trick play which used a wild bird. That is all,” Sai said, smiling faintly. They had been right to go along with Ino’s idea of pretending to lose consciousness and entering the falcon.

“You dodged the kunai Sai threw, instead of repelling it with your chakra cloak,” Ino said. “Which means that the cloak will let a kunai through. So I figured we could try catching you off guard and hitting you with one of those poison kunai.”

“Heh,” Magire laughed. “It’s quite fine to be filled with your own self-importance, but you’re forgetting something crucial. Those who use poison carry the antidote to that poison, lest they themselves die from it. If I take that antidote now—”

“Gosh, I sure hope that antidote works.” Ino smiled boldly.

Magire looked confused.

“The kunai in that back of yours. While it’s true we borrowed the kunai itself from you, we replaced the poison inside with my own anesthetic.”

“...What?” Magire finally said.

When they made the smoke curtain, Sai had readied the tigers and his clone, while Ino worked on switching out the contents of the kunai.

Her anesthetic now began to take effect, and Magire’s body started shaking.

“Foolish, this kind of foolish method...” As he shook, the chakra cloak covering his body also began to destabilize. It swelled up and then deflated, before swelling up again.

Sai decided to settle things.

He got out his scroll and brush and began to draw two large figures once more.

Fujin! Raijin!

The enormous images that appeared looked down at Magire. In their shadow,

a look of fear came over Magire's face. The six tails, only recently raging so ferociously, were slumped and stretched out on the ground.

Raijin shook a foot.

The anesthetic had already stolen Magire's ability to move, so he couldn't get out of the way. Kicked like a tiny pebble, he bounced several times on the ground before tumbling to a stop.

Fujin's foot came down where he stopped. The ground shook for a moment and then was still.

That should have finished it once and for all.

Sai and Ino raced over to Fujin's foot.

When the giant lifted it up, they saw Magire sunk into the earth. He was completely unconscious, and the Tailed Beast chakra was also gone. But...

"He's not dead, huh? Just barely, but still," Ino said.

"We have to hurry up and get to Sakura," Sai said, and returned the two giants to ink.

At that moment, one black shadow after another hit the ground nearby, and they reflexively jumped into defensive postures, thinking it was Kido's reinforcements.

But that was not the case.

"Master! And Naruto! And Hinata!" Ino cried out.

It was Kakashi, Naruto, and Hinata, all in uniform.

"Hinata and me were going to visit Neji's grave when we saw Master Kakashi not in his Hokage uniform, right?" Naruto said. "So we figured something was up and followed him."

"After I talked with the Raikage, I thought I'd come offer some support. These two spotted me on my way here. And, you know, I wondered whether a dangerous mission was such a good idea given that they're going to be married soon. But they'd just come anyway, if I told them not to. You know how they are," Kakashi told them with a wry smile, and turned his gaze to the ground. "So

that's Magire, hm? He's been nicely pressed."

"How did you know we were here?" Sai asked.

Kakashi lifted his face. "I knew there were some serious chakra slamming up against each other. So I had a general idea of where you were. The rest was Hinata's byakugan."

"Where's Sakura?" Hinata asked, looking uneasy.

"She's fighting Kido right now," Ino replied.

Kakashi turned his eyes toward the forest. "Over there? Let's go."

4

Kido had grown...nine tails. But they weren't growing from the chakra cloak.

Is this...did he turn into a Tailed Beast? Sakura furrowed her brow.

The changes to Kido's body after taking the Tailed Beast drug were very different from what happened with his subordinates.

The light purple chakra explosively growing larger was the same, but in Kido's case, it became something like a hard skin covering his entire body, much different from the semi-transparent filmlike cloak that coated his subordinates.

Although he had nine tails, his silhouette was not that of a storied fox spirit. Rather than a beast, he was perhaps more accurately described as a mysterious purple person.

"I can't say the look is very refined, but you'll soon see that I'm orders of magnitude stronger," Kido said.

His appearance itself was not particularly frightening. But the amount of chakra he was emitting was overwhelming.

"I guess so," Sakura said. "I'm a little sorry I turned this into a one-on-one fight."

"Don't worry. I intend not to kill you if possible. Here, at least. But—" In that instant, Kido disappeared. "—if you do die, my apologies."

"Ngh!" She didn't have time to turn around. She sprang forward and immediately felt a roaring wind at her back. She knew Kido was waving his tails.

She heard the splintering crack of an enormous tree falling in the wind generated by those tails as she landed on a thick branch and dropped into a defensive posture.

Or that's what she intended to do, at least. But the branch under her feet was destroyed by a tail sailing forth, and Sakura was thrown into the air.

But she didn't fall to the ground. Instead, a tail shooting in from the side struck a direct hit to her body.

Sakura flew through the forest, smashing through branch after branch after branch. If she hadn't sent her chakra racing through her entire body, that single blow would have knocked her out of the fight.

Her back slammed into a massive tree trunk, and she finally came to a stop. She started to slide down the trunk, but she quickly bounced back into a counterattack.

She kicked at the trunk and leapt through the branches to approach Kido dead-on.

"That's the spirit!" Kido launched his tails in rapid succession.

Sakura slipped through the purple spears by a hair's breadth and landed before her enemy. She drove a fist into his chest.

The skin was hard. The reactive force threatened to shatter her own body. The sensation of the punch lingered in her fist.

As proof of her act, a crack appeared where she had hit him. The skin in that area broke into small pieces and peeled away, falling to the ground.

"That is an almost terrifying destructive power. To be able to injure my body when it's enhanced by the Tailed Beast drug. However..." Kido laughed abruptly. "This takes us back to where we started."

The cracked outer skin was repaired before her eyes and restored to its original form.

Sakura gasped.

"I suppose you drew Magire and myself apart because he's a medical ninja,"

Kido remarked. "It seems there was no point in that, hmm?"

An armor of unusual hardness with the ability to regenerate itself. Topped with nine tails sent out at will, an attack that was impossible to predict.

This just gets worse and worse, Sakura thought. Maybe this wasn't the best idea...

But Sakura herself had brought about this situation. This was no time for whining.

"Are you going to give up and choose instead to die before Sasuke? Isn't that how you'd really like to die anyway?"

"You've got to be kidding." Sasuke smiled slightly. "If it's this or dying in front of Sasuke, I choose fighting it out with you here."

"Fighting it out?" Kido grinned. "The only thing you have is ridiculous strength. How do you intend to fight it out with me?"

"I'll just do this!" she cried out, and once again launched her fist.

She punched hard at the same place where the crack had been before.

She felt a response, the spot where her fist had landed cracking. But the results were the same as before. A small area of the skin peeled away and fell off, but was quickly repaired.

"You might have ridiculous strength, but like this, you're simply ridiculous." Kido wove a sign with both hands. It was one she'd seen before.

Lightning Style! Bear Trap!

The circle of electric teeth came snapping at Sakura.

In an instant, she determined that she wouldn't be able to stop it. She realized that the jutsu, now enhanced by the drug, was several orders of magnitude faster and more destructive than when she had seen it before.

Unable to retreat and avoid the attack, Sakura leapt forward and slipped through the circle of lightning to dodge the bear trap. The sharp snap behind her told her the trap had closed.

Perhaps not expecting that Sakura would step toward him, Kido took another

hit from Sakura's fist.

But this time, no cracks appeared.

"What? Are you exhausted already?"

"Not by a long shot!" she shouted back, and launched her fist once more. A hit. But no cracks. She pulled her arm farther back.

"I'm not about to simply stand here and allow you to punch me to your heart's content," Kido snarled.

A tail shot out. She dodged. Another tail came flying at her. She dodged. But the next tail hit.

Sakura flew backward and slammed into an enormous tree, forcing the air out of her lungs. She very nearly lost consciousness, and dropped to the ground. But soon enough, she was back on her feet.

Kido also jumped down to earth.

Sakura clenched her hands into fists and dashed toward him.

Pummel Kido's chest—that was the only thing in her head.

"The foolhardy only die young, you know," Kido said, as he threw out his tails in a feint.

Sakura dodged them, one after the other. But simply dodging didn't get her any closer to Kido.

One tail snaked forward sharply, and she couldn't get out of the way. *Thmp!* The thick tail plunged through her stomach. But Sakura ignored it and kept running.

I won't die!

Ninja Art! Mitotic Regeneration!

Sakura's entire body swelled with Byakugou chakra, and a design rose up on her forehead. The cells where she had been pierced rapidly divided, healing the wound. But the tail was still plunged through her midsection, so she couldn't close the wound opening.

"You...!" Kido stared in disbelief.

It was only for a moment, but he seemed almost afraid of Sakura charging forward, his tail still lodged in her.

Sakura closed the distance between them and launched punch after punch. She wouldn't have another chance to press in this close to her enemy. She wanted to get in as many blows as she possibly could.

She attacked in quick succession, but the surface of Kido's body failed to crack.

"Eeah! Enough!" Kido waved the tail piercing Sakura, and her body slid smoothly off.

Her chakra immediately closed up the wound where it had punctured her.

"So we both have the little trick of self-healing, hm? But what are you going to do now?" Kido asked, tails floating lightly in the air. "You can only attack with your fists. And there's no point in trying to wait out the effect, you know. I still have a decent stock of the Tailed Beast drug."

"It's true, I can't actually do anything. All I have are fists, so all I can do is punch." Sakura brushed away the dirt on her face and glared at her opponent.

"I'm afraid I don't understand. Why do you not stop when it's so clearly pointless to continue? I find it simply mysterious."

"It's obvious, isn't it?" Sakura said. "I want to take you down. I won't let you make a drug or anything out of Sasuke's eyes. And I'm not letting you make the Tailed Beast drug either. I won't let you build your military company. That feeling—my feelings—they haven't changed! So I'll face off against you, however many times it takes!"

So I'll tell Sasuke how I feel however many times it takes!

...Wait. What?

Abruptly, a feeling of love for Sasuke rose up in her heart, knocking her off-balance.

Was pummeling Kido's hard outer skin making her think of her love for Sasuke, a feeling that went unrewarded no matter how many times she told him about it?

No. It's not unrewarded.

Sasuke and I have been getting closer bit by bit.

"I'll see you soon..."

They had gotten all the way to that point.

And this fight with Kido was the same. Sakura hadn't abandoned all hope yet. As long as her chakra held out, she intended to keep pummeling him.

"No matter how many times you try, the result is always the same. Your fists will lose their power before you injure this body of mine."

"Sorry," Sakura said, clenching her fists. "But I'm used to attacking over and over and being repelled!" She started running.

Arriving in front of Kido, she hurled her fist at him.

Hit! Hit! Hit! she chanted as she beat at her opponent. He tried to dodge her or guard, but she simply and intently continued to strike the same place.

She saw a momentary lapse in his guard and grabbed hold of the chance to plunge her fist toward him. The punch that landed was solid.

She watched as a single crack raced along the purple outer skin.

Yes! she shouted to herself triumphantly.

Suddenly, Kido opened his mouth wide. Instantly, Sakura intuited danger. She could see highly concentrated chakra being readied in his mouth.

This is bad! Leaping backward to one side, she crossed her arms in front of her face. *A Bijū Bomb?!*

Immediately after she had this thought, a lump of chakra was launched from Kido's mouth.

The spherical lump had likely been compressed within his body, but the moment it left his mouth, it swelled up to a diameter of a meter or so, and headed straight for Sakura.

She managed to evade a direct hit, but it still glanced across half of her body. And from that alone, the impact was tremendous.

The force of the tails paled in comparison with this chakra blow, and Sakura went flying into the woods, smashing through several thick branches before slamming into an enormous rock and coming to a stop.

Sliding down onto the ground, she couldn't stand again right away. Just breathing sent a fierce pain racing through her body. She checked that her limbs would move properly as she finally stood back up.

"Stop already. The condition you're in now, you won't be able to evade the next Biju Bomb," Kido said, walking toward her. "You really will die, you know."

"I won't. Stop," Sakura said. Her voice was slightly hoarse. "After all, just a little more and..."

Kido cocked his head to one side. "A little more? What is that supposed to mean? It's all you can do to stand. I am uninjured. Isn't this what they mean by a 'hopeless situation'?"

"Uninjured? You?" A slight smile rose up on Sakura's lips.

Kido's face became doubtful, and he turned his gaze toward his own chest. And then he noticed it.

That the crack running along his skin was not healing, that pieces in the center were beginning to peel away and fall off.

"Wha—! How is this—!" Kido panicked. "Why isn't it starting to heal?!"

"Because the cells there are already dead."

"Dead...?" The skin on his chest continued to peel off and fall away in chunks.

"My punches were working. I only made it seem like they weren't."

Kido stared at her intently without saying a word.

"While I was pounding on your chest, I was also sending healing chakra. What actually happened was my healing chakra instantly repaired the cracks that appeared. So it looked like you weren't hurt, like my fists weren't doing anything at all."

"You healed the damage...? For what purpose..."

"To speed up the death of the cells, obviously," Sakura told him. "A wound

healing basically means that the cells in the area divide anew and block the wound opening. But the number of times the cells in your body can divide is limited. Your armor's hard. But if you keep forcing the cells to divide, at some point, they die, and you can break through that point. Practical trick of Mitotic Regeneration."

"Ridiculous. Don't think that a scratch like this will decide this contest...!" Kido's face twisted in rage.

Sakura clenched her fists. It was just as he said—simply making a hole in part of his armor didn't mean she had won.

One more hit!

Sakura started running to launch one final blow at that hole with everything she had.

She drew her arm back and determined her target.

In her field of view, she saw Kido's mouth opening.

A second Bijū Bomb! Sakura guessed.

"Haah!" Dropping low about ten meters in front of Kido, she slammed her fists into the ground.

The earth shook, and Kido wobbled and lost his balance. In that instant, Sakura danced up before him.

Today's second—!!

"Oh yeeah!!"

The Cherry Blossom Crash, the last of Sakura's chakra riding on it, slammed into Kido's chest.

She felt her fist sing at the perfect hit. As if to prove it, Kido flew through the air, cutting down enormous trees and pulverizing massive boulders.

5

Hit with a blow the likes of which he'd never felt before, Kido flew.

And as he flew, he spit up blood.

Blood calling up bits of memories from the depths of his brain.

His father collapsed, vomiting blood.

"Dad! Dad!"

Kido and his mother raced over to where his father knelt at the edge of the bed.

"Why did he stop taking his medication?" the doctor said to his mother, scoldingly.

I was convinced he was taking it. In the end, his mother never uttered these words that had to have risen up in her heart.

He found so many white capsules in the drawer of his father's desk.

There was nothing inside them. They were just empty capsules.

"You always forget to take your medication. From now on, please make sure you take it in front of me."

"Ha ha ha! All right." His father laughed and flashed a white capsule at his mother. *"See? I'm taking it."* A capsule with nothing in it, empty.

"Pretty great, huh, Kido? Now you can go to the academy like everyone else."

"Yeah. Thanks, Dad!"

Despite his sickly nature, his father had gone out on missions to earn money for them. And thanks to that, Kido had been able to go to the ninja academy. He had half given up on the academy because he knew money was tight around the house, so this news was like the song of angels in his ears.

But the truth was different.

His father had a chronic illness and had to take a certain medication for it.

An expensive medication.

He stopped taking it.

He kept taking the empty capsules in front of Kido and his mother, and saved up the money he would've spent on that medication.

His father gave up on his own life and put the money for his medication

toward his son's tuition.

"Pretty great, huh, Kido?"

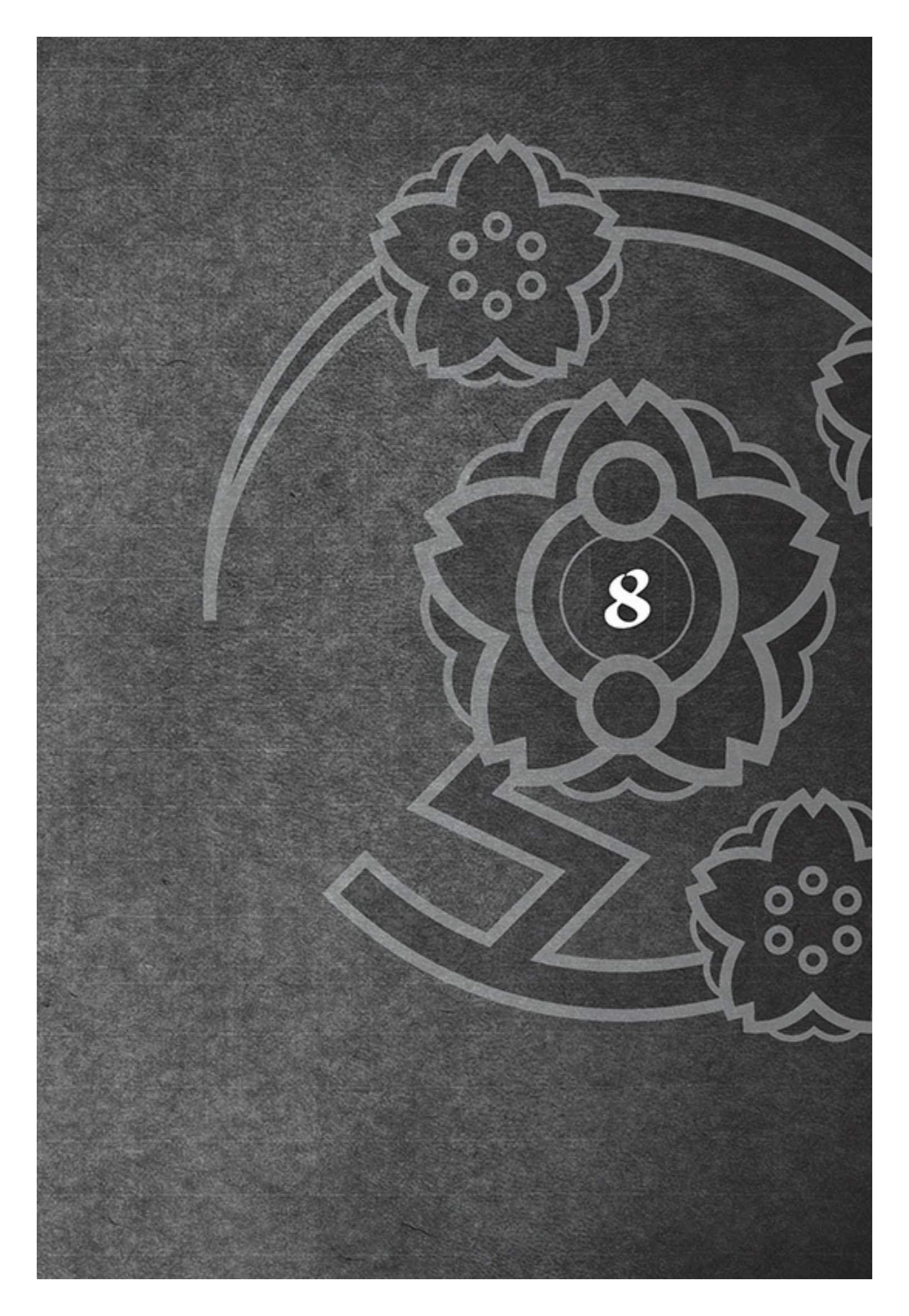
"It's not even a little bit great..." he told the portrait of his father over and over again.

If he had money, his father could have taken his medicine.

If he had money, his father wouldn't have died.

If he had money—

Money—



8

Chapter 8

1

Several fierce collisions thundered through the air before the forest finally fell silent again.

Sakura started walking in the direction Kido had flown off.

Her opponent was flat on the ground in a slightly open area of the forest, broken and beaten.

Slowly, without letting her guard down, Sakura approached him. He seemed to be unconscious; the Tailed Beast chakra was gone, and he was back to his uniformed appearance.

At that moment, she heard Ino's voice from above her head.

"Sakuraaaaa!"

Lifting her face, she saw three birds and then Sai and Ino dropping down from their backs, followed by Kakashi, Naruto, and Hinata.

"Master Kakashi... Guys..."

"Sorry we're late," Kakashi said.

"You manage okay, Sakura?" Naruto asked.

"Yeah. Somehow."

"Nice work taking him down alone," Kakashi said, looking at Kido.

"Although I'm just barely standing," Sakura said, with a wry smile. In fact, her chakra was almost entirely depleted. "What about Magire?"

"Me and Ino, we managed," Sai replied.

"He can't move because of my paralysis drug," Ino added. "But just in case, Sai's clone is standing guard."

At that moment, the supposedly unconscious Kido let out a faint groan. "Kakashi...?"

"Don't do anything stupid. If I see you moving even an inch, I'll cut you down,"

Kido informed the other man, coolly.

They could hear Kido clicking his tongue softly.

“So this guy was trying to make some kind of weird drug, yeah, Sakura?” Naruto asked.

“He was. Using your hair and Sasuke’s.”

“Creepy!” Naruto stuck his tongue out.

“A Tailed Beast drug and a sharingan drug, hmm? It’s definitely creepy, but if something like that got out into the world, it’d be more than a little hassle. And if the bad guys could just power up so easily, controlling them’d be serious work too,” Kakashi said, and shrugged.

“But we stopped the sharingan drug at least,” Ino said.

“And the Tailed Beast drug too,” Sai said. “If we search their hideouts, we should be able to seize all of that too.”

“I suppose so. All that’s left now is to hand them over to the interrogation—” Kakashi abruptly cut himself off and narrowed his eyes sharply.

“Master?” said a puzzled Sakura on behalf of them all.

“I’m getting a Mind Transmission voice from the Barrier Team,” Kakashi said, before putting a hand to his forehead and conversing with the Mind Transmission sender.

“Got it.” Once he was done the conversation, Kakashi turned to Sakura and the others. “Several people wearing Anbu masks apparently slipped out of the village.”

“The Anbu?”

Kakashi nodded and turned his eyes on Kido. “Your subordinates?”

Kido smiled thinly. “In all my safe houses, I’ve placed receivers linked with my chakra and life signs. It’s set up so that an emergency alarm sounds if my chakra decreases significantly. The standing instruction for my subordinates is to leave the village immediately when it goes off. With the drugs.”

Kakashi clicked his tongue. “Well prepared.”

“You sure it’s okay for your subordinates to run?” Sakura asked. “You’re going to be put in prison, you know.”

“I take responsibility for being defeated in battle. I will submit to imprisonment. But in exchange, my subordinates will spread the Tailed Beast drug outside the village. The ninja world will be destroyed, and public order will fall at once. And that will be my gratification.” Kido chuckled.

“Where are your subordinates headed?” Kakashi asked.

“Do you really think I’d answer that?”

“I don’t. So sleep for me for a bit,” Kakashi replied, and chopped at the back of Kido’s neck with the edge of a straightened hand. Kido fell unconscious. “We’ll go after them right away. Barrier Team said they broke the barrier on the north side of the village and went out there. Sai, your birds.”

Nodding, Sai called in the birds on standby in the sky.

“Just in case, Naruto and I will leave clones here.”

“Understood.”

Kakashi and Naruto wove signs and used their clone jutsu.

“Take care of this,” Kakashi instructed the new clones before jumping onto a bird with Sakura and the others.

They were split up in pairs: Sai and Ino, Kakashi and Sakura, and Naruto and Hinata. The birds rose up into the air and started toward the north.

“Honestly. Right up to the very last of it, he’s giving me headaches,” Kakashi said, with a sigh.

“You think we can catch them?” Ino said, uneasily, on top of the bird next to him.

“If they increase their chakra with the Tailed Beast drug, they’ll be able to travel pretty fast,” Sai noted. “It’s iffy.”

“Hinata, if you see anything, say something, okay?” Naruto called out.

“Okay!” came Hinata’s reply. Before long, she cried out. “Ah! Toward our ten o’clock! I can see a fire!”

“A fire?” Kakashi asked.

“Yes. And some people on the ground...”

The row of birds changed course and flew ahead even faster.

Finally, the scene became visible to Sakura and the others as well. Several people were collapsed in the grassy plain below them. Around the bodies, they could faintly make out smoke rising up.

“What is that?!” Ino cried out.

“We’re going down!” Kakashi said, and the birds lowered their altitude.

Sakura and the others leapt off the birds’ backs onto the ground and raced over to the scene.

The people collapsed there were Anbu ninja. None of them were dead, but all of them had totally disrupted chakra and their awareness was clouded. Meaning genjutsu had been used on them.

Genjutsu...?! Sakura gasped and sent her eyes racing around the area.

She felt like she saw a human shadow momentarily cut across the forest at the far reaches of her vision. A glimpse of a back in a turban and a coat.

Sakura almost cried out. But in the time it took for her to blink, the figure was gone. She squinted and strained her eyes, but she couldn’t sense any aura or chakra.

Just my imagination?

No. It can’t be...

She heard Ino speaking. “So what is this? What happened?”

“Mm. Somehow...apparently, someone caught up with them before we did and finished them off for us,” Kakashi said, crossing his arms.

“Finished them off for us?” Ino asked.

“You guys know, don’t you?” Kakashi asked Team Seven, grinning playfully.

“Yes.” Sakura smiled, and Naruto rubbed the bottom of his nose with a chuckle. Sai also grinned brightly when he got it.

Traces of Fire Style jutsu. The Anbu members attacked with genjutsu. And—maybe it had just been her imagination, but—that figure she saw for an instant from behind.

“What?! You don’t mean Sasuke?!” Ino shouted.

“Well, that’s probably it.”

“The real one? Seriously?”

“Pretty sure that was the real one,” Kakashi said, laughing.

“What? Then why isn’t he here?”

“He probably went back,” Sai said. “To his traveling.”

“No no no, that’s just cold. I mean, the village is totally not far from here, right? He could at least stop by. Right, Sakura?”

“Right,” Sakura replied, but strangely, she didn’t feel sad about it.

After not reacting at all to this whole thing, practically telling them to handle it themselves, Sasuke came back in the end. She was happy to know this.

On his way back to the village, Sasuke came across the Anbu members cloaked in the Tailed Beast chakra. They fought, and he won with his Fire Style and genjutsu.

If he used his sharingan, he could read his opponent’s memory.

So he probably read the memory of one of the Anbu there. So when he learned about the decisive battle fought by Sakura and the others against Kido, he took in the fact that Kido’s chakra suddenly dropped, and figured out that these Anbu were fleeing the village.

If the big boss Kido had been defeated, then there was nothing left for him to do. He would go back to his journey. And then Sasuke left this place...

This was how Sakura imagined the events that had so recently taken place there.

“I dunno.” Naruto shrugged. “Doing what needs to be done, and then up and disappearing, that sounds pretty much like Sasuke.”

“It really does.” Sakura giggled. But she was glad to just be able to feel these

lingering echoes of this “Sasuke-ness.”

“But, you know, since you guys took down Kido and Magire, I figured it was about time for me to step up. And then Sasuke comes along and steals my thunder here.” Kakashi shook his head regretfully.

“If you’re having digestion trouble, Master, did you want to run back home?” Sai said. “We’ll be taking the birds, though.”

“Oh, I’m not going to get all worked up just for the sake of it,” Kakashi replied, immediately. “That’s more Guy’s style.”

They all burst out laughing at the Hokage’s light tone.

2

Tsumiki Kido and Magire were transferred to the custody of the interrogation force. The investigation proceeded with Morino Ibiki in the lead, but at first, Kido and Magire held their tongues. So Ibiki changed methods, switching from oral interrogation to reading his prisoners’ minds.

The intelligence division’s specialized machine was readied, and someone from the Yamanaka clan was called in to be the examiner.

No matter how tightly they might have kept their mouths shut, it was pointless when their minds could be read with the machine and the jutsu.

As a result, Kakashi and his team learned a number of things concerning the Kido faction. Most notably, the locations of safe houses and hideouts within the village. And the other members of the faction.

By cracking the safe houses and hideouts, they were able to seize all of the Tailed Beast drug. The confiscated drug was brought to Shizune, who began analysis on it, together with the information read from Kido’s and Magire’s minds.

“So they really did collect Naruto’s hair and blood from the Final Valley. And then they extracted the Tailed Beast chakra and made the drug,” Kakashi said in the Hokage’s Office.

Sakura, Ino, and Sai took in this report, standing in front of his desk.

“But could they really make the drug with just that?” Sakura asked. “And in

such large quantities?”

“There’s a story to that. They went and found someone with the blood of the Sage of Six Paths and forced him to help with researching and producing the Tailed Beast drug.”

“The Sage of Six Paths...?” Sakura furrowed her brow.

Kakashi nodded before turning toward Ino. “You don’t remember, Ino? The brothers Kinkaku and Ginkaku who used to be in Kumogakure?”

“Of course I remember. We fought them in the war, after all,” Ino replied.

Ninja brothers, powerful in the village of Kumogakure. In the last Great War, they had been brought back to life with Edo Tensei and fought Ino’s team. Sakura knew this as well.

“But what does that...?”

“Kinkaku and Ginkaku ate the flesh of Nine Tails and gained Tailed Beast chakra. Kido and his team took a clue from that and came up with the Tailed Beast drug, apparently.” Kakashi paused before continuing, “They collected Naruto’s personal material in the Final Valley. The amount of chakra they got from that was too little to make into a drug. So they needed to make more. And Sakura and Ino, you two probably know more about this than I do, but when you’re cultivating cells, you need a medium, right?”

“That’s right. Something to feed the cells you want to grow, some kind of base for them,” Sakura said.

“This descendant of the Sage of Six Paths—well, it was some boy in one of the small lands to the south, but anyway—Kido and Magire kidnapped him and locked him up in one of their safe houses. Then they made him donate some tissue and used that as a medium to increase the amount of Naruto’s Tailed Beast chakra.”

The boy had refused. Naturally. He was a boy from a country with nothing whatsoever to do with Konoha, living a very normal life as a noncombatant. But Kido had used threats and drugs to break his will. Unable to resist, the boy had been forced to donate tissue under the supervision of Kido’s faction.

“And now he’s...?” Sakura asked.

“Don’t worry,” Kakashi replied. “He was rescued when we searched their hideouts.”

“Thank goodness.” Sakura breathed a sigh of relief, and Ino and Sai exchanged a look.

“And,” Kakashi announced. “There’s one more report from the examiner who dove into Kido’s memories.” But instead of continuing immediately, Kakashi took a moment, almost as if choosing his words carefully. “The primary factor in this incident—I’m not sure if we can say for sure, but it’s about Kido’s upbringing. Tsubaki Kido was born into a poor family...”

The story Kakashi then told was one to make their hearts ache, when seen from the point of view of the recent series of events.

A father who, in order to send his son to the academy, quit taking his own medication, and instead took empty capsules. A painful story.

Although the Land of Fire, where the village of Konohagakure was situated, was relatively wealthy compared with the other five great nations, this sort of thing still happened.

An abnormal fixation on money. Military business through drugs. The connections with Kido’s youth were obvious. But...

“That said, this mess Kido caused now, we can’t just wave it off like it was bound to happen,” Kakashi noted.

Sakura and the others frowned slightly. It was a tough problem. Not the sort of thing where you could simply say “do this” and be done with it.

“Well, as Hokage, I’m just going to make sure I create a village where we don’t see kids going through this kind of thing,” Kakashi declared.

∞

“I’m glad we created the children’s therapy center,” Sakura said to Ino and Sai after they had left the Hokage’s Residence.

“Because of that story about Kido’s childhood?” Ino asked, and she nodded.

“Yeah. We really can’t just leave kids with that kind of emotional trauma.”

In that last fight, Kido had denied there was any meaning to the children’s therapy center. He had aggressively asserted that the center would only increase the number of weak children in the world.

Was it his own painful experiences during childhood making him spit such bitterness at her?

There was nothing like that for me. Don’t spoil them. I made it through on my own strength. Maybe that kind of hard feeling drove Kido.

But this was from the man had put into motion the recent scheming and trouble. Thinking about it like that, she felt even more keenly how critical it was to care for children’s minds. It was hard to treat mental scars.

She glanced at Sai. He’d also gone through a cruel childhood. A war orphan, he had joined Root and been forced into fierce training. He’d had painful partings as well.

Back when they first met, Sai was like an emotionless machine. Not only did he not smile, he was a boy who didn’t even know at what sorts of times anyone smiled. He could definitely smile now, though. And get mad. Because he had friends right there alongside him to heal those mental scars.

And Sasuke too. Sakura’s thoughts turned to the traveler.

The tragedy of his clan—his boyhood was one of being tossed around by destiny. Nearly carried away by hatred, what saved Sasuke was Naruto and all of his other friends in the village.

It would be so great if the children’s therapy center could be a friend like that, Sakura thought. A place you could visit freely and talk about anything. And if you were bad at talking, then you could just be bad at it. They would work on their side to make it so you could get the words out—they would wait until you said something. That kind of place.

“I want this to be a village where all the children are laughing,” Sakura said. “Although that might be hard to do.”

It might be hard. But this whole incident had only strengthened her conviction

that they had to try.

“Yeah,” Ino said, and Sai smiled.

“Sakura!” A voice called out.

Turning around, she saw a younger medical ninja who worked at Konoha Hospital running toward them. It was the woman who had reported on the results of the therapy center at the last meeting.

“The medical ninja of Sunagakure have come with a number of questions about the children’s therapy center,” this younger ninja said.

“They have? Okay, I’m coming,” Sakura replied.

“I’ll come too?” Ino asked.

Sakura was about to agree, but quickly rethought that. “Mm, it’s okay. I’ll take care of it.”

“But—” Ino began, but Sakura leaned over to whisper in her ear.

“It’s okay. You go and get something to eat with Sai.”

“Hey...” Ino’s face grew red as if to say “Don’t get the wrong idea.”

“It’s okay!” Sakura said again. “Ino-Saku-Sai was just this once,” she whispered. “And once you’re given a mission on a formal team again, you won’t have as many chances to be alone together, you know?”

When Sakura pointed this out, Ino’s feelings seemed to resolve themselves.

“Right, okay then.” Ino nodded.

“See you later.” Sakura waved a hand and turned on her heel.

Maybe I shouldn’t have butted in.

Heading toward the hospital with the younger ninja, Sakura looked back at Sai and Ino walking side by side. Sometimes, she saw smiles on their faces that had the same air to them as the ones she had seen before on Naruto’s and Hinata’s.

Lavender and dogwood.

Ino didn’t know which to choose, but Sakura thought the answer would probably come unexpectedly fast.

You can do it, Ino! she yelled after her friend in her heart.

The Sakura of a little while ago would have been panicking. Everyone's finding love; she was the only one who wasn't. That sort of thing.

But she was different now.

"I'll see you soon."

That "soon" was bound to come. She even thought it was maybe almost time for it to be "soon."

When Sasuke came home, she wanted to talk about this mess with Kido—she wanted to talk about so many other things with him too.

Welcome home, Sasuke.

The thing is, I...

"I'm back, Sakura."

MASASHI KISHIMOTO

Author/artist Masashi Kishimoto was born in 1974 in rural Okayama Prefecture, Japan. Like many kids, he was first inspired to become a manga artist in elementary school when he read *Dragon Ball* by Akira Toriyama. After spending time in art college, he won the Hop Step Award for new manga artists with his story *Karakuri*. After considering various genres for his next project, Kishimoto decided on a story steeped in traditional Japanese culture.

His first version of *Naruto*, drawn in 1997, was a one-shot story about fox spirits; his final version, which debuted in *Weekly Shonen Jump* in 1999, quickly became the most popular ninja manga in the world. The series would also spawn multiple anime series, movies, novels, video games and more. Having concluded the series in late 2014, Masashi Kishimoto has kept himself busy this year with the sidestory *Naruto: The Seventh Hokage and the Scarlet Spring* and writing the story for the latest Naruto movie, *Boruto: Naruto the Movie* both of which will focus on the title character's son, Boruto.

TOMOHITO OHSAKI

Born in Hiroshima Prefecture, Ohsaki was the winner of the ninth Jump Novel Grand Prix. He has adapted the manga *Gin Tama* and *Nura: Rise of the Yokai Clan* into novels, and writes the manga *Te to Kuchi*, with artist Mizuki Kawashita. He has an established reputation as a skilled author of period pieces and comedy.

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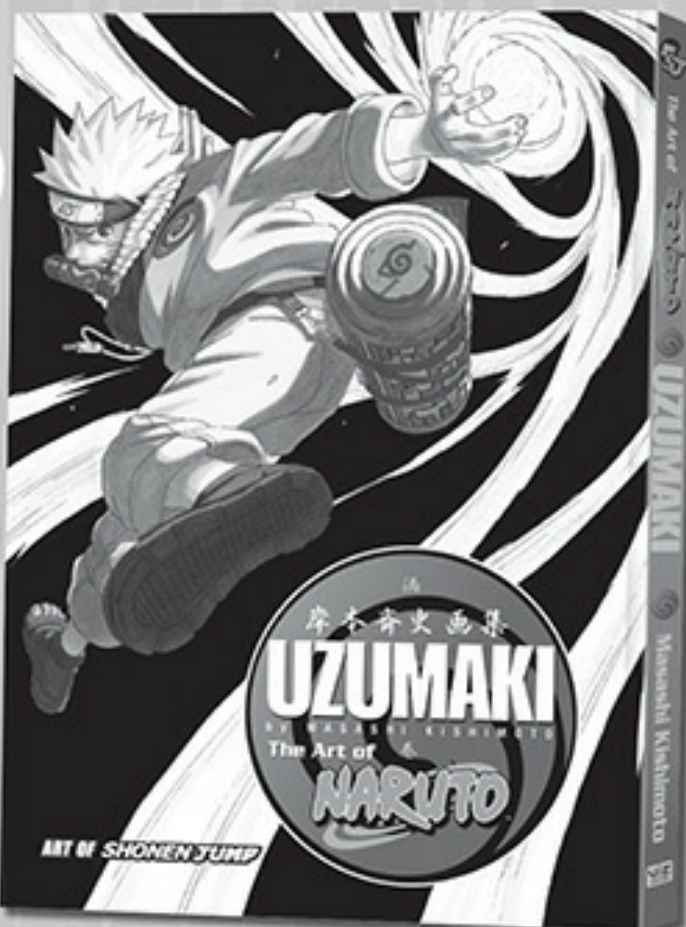
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